



CHAPTER 1

The Primary Mission of the Church

‘The standing ordinance of a spiritual Church in the world, distinct in its origin, in its objects, in its instrumentality, from the kingdoms of this world, is the grand and public lesson taught by God as to the fundamental distinction between things civil and things spiritual.’

JAMES BANNERMAN

It was the Sunday after the United States had invaded Iraq. I was responsible for part of the worship service at our relatively new church plant in California. We had not called a pastor yet, so the professors from the local theological seminary, who were ministers, were carrying the load of preaching and administering the sacraments. Following the service, I was in a room being interviewed by a visitor to the worship service.

This was no ordinary visitor. He was a newspaper reporter who had come with the goal of observing our worship service so that he could write up a review of our new church in a local paper. His review was called ‘Sheep and Goats.’ He was Jewish. Our church, which was still a mission work, was a conservative Presbyterian one. He was struck by many things: the refreshments afterwards, but especially the presence of little children in the service sitting well-behaved next to their parents, and the fact that he was not looked at scornfully by the members of our church when the

elements were passed for the Lord's supper. After all, he didn't want to partake; this was *our* ritual, not his (besides the fact that I had 'fenced' the table). He was grateful that he felt welcomed even though he did not participate. Apparently, he had not experienced the same courtesy at other Protestant churches he had visited. However, what made one of the biggest impressions upon him was the lack of any reference to politics, political parties, or the war that had just begun with the invasion of Iraq the previous week. I explained that our church was 'apolitical' and although we think it is very important to pray for our civil leaders, as the Apostle Paul had commanded us, we were very careful not to make political comments or even give political impressions in our prayers from the pulpit. As ministers, we conduct our public ministry without reference or bias given to civil leaders, governments and political parties. It is not that we are uninterested in issues of social injustice, but the church corporately was not given the task to address structural injustice. Of course, I explained that does not mean that ministers don't recognize that we are civilians individually, with responsibilities to pay taxes, pray for all our leaders regardless of party affiliation, and to obey the laws of the land as long as we are not coerced to stop preaching the gospel or coerced by the government to perform some other sin. As Guy Waters explains: 'We are not urging the believer's withdrawal from society of social engagement We are saying that Christ has limited the courts of the church to declaring the will of Christ as revealed in the Scriptures.'¹ However, we are neutral and apolitical when we serve as ministers and as a corporate church. Neither Republican, Democrat, nor Independent. The state and church operate in different orbits. Although their authority derives from the same source—God—we rigorously uphold the spiritual nature of the church and her corporate responsibilities. This was something this newspaper reporter had not observed elsewhere. His experience observing numerous Protestant churches for his job had left him up to this point with an entirely different impression. I explained that what frequently passes for a social gospel is not *the* gospel. He gave us a very good review in the subsequent weeks in the newspaper. I was grateful for the encounter.

This book is about the primary mission of the church. Therefore, in the chapters that follow, I will be defining the church and her mission.

1. Guy Prentiss Waters, *How Jesus Runs the Church* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2011), p. 70.

I will not talk about all the aspects of what a church should be and how it should be run. For example, I write sparsely about officers in the church even though Scripture has a good deal to say about this. Nor will I write very much about the diaconate, although this is another important part of the church's work. I am writing with a particular goal in mind to address some fundamental things about the primary mission of the church that in many places has never been adequately learned or in some cases may have been willfully neglected. But God has not left us bereft of instruction in this area. After all, the origin of the church, together with principles and rules for its government, are all found in the will and determination of God in eternity, as will be discussed below. Does it make any sense whatsoever that he would leave us without his revealed will in such matters for the present church? No.

Before we embark on our study of the primary mission of the church, it is important to get some definitions clear. Much confusion happens in theological discourse because terminological distinctions are not clear early on. First of all, it is important to distinguish between the visible church and the invisible church. The *invisible church*, as defined by the Westminster Larger Catechism, is 'the whole number of the elect that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one under Christ the head.'² Therefore, the church exists beyond the level of the local congregation according to this definition. Where disagreements arise is with regard to how this church ought to be governed. In distinction from this is the *visible church*. The visible church is defined as 'catholic or universal under the Gospel (not confined to one nation, as before under the law), consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion; and of their children; and is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation.'³

Notice the differences between the invisible and visible church. Waters sets this out succinctly in his wonderfully organized and accessible volume on the church:

First, the visible church is universal in nature. It is, however, the church as you and I see it in our generation. The invisible church, also universal, is spread across many generations. Second, one is a member of the visible church either by profession of Christianity or by descending from a parent

2. Westminster Larger Catechism (WLC 64).

3. Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF 25.2).

who professes Christianity. One is part of the invisible church by the eternal decree of God. Third, the numbers of the visible church increase or diminish. The numbers of the invisible church are fixed and never change. Fourth and particularly important for our consideration, there are some members of the visible church who are not true members of the invisible church.⁴

These categories, visible and invisible church, will be used throughout this book when we refer to the church as visible or invisible.

Another very important point needs to be made right at the beginning. These are Presbyterian and Reformed definitions. In other words, I recognize that a Baptist brother or sister will not agree with these definitions; however, I write as a Presbyterian and this by no means implies that someone who differs with these categories is not a Christian. We should not be so dogmatic as to break communion over this particular issue with our brothers and sisters in Christ who differ from us on these distinctions. Polity, and even the subject of baptism, in this author's opinion, belongs not to the *esse* (essence) of the church but to the *bene esse* (well being) of the church.

Another important topic that will come up frequently below is what is called 'divine right' (*jure divino*) ecclesiastical government, particularly Presbyterianism. The church may not do whatever it deems wise in its polity; rather, there must be a clear sanction in the Bible not only for her worship but for her doctrine and practice. James Bannerman (1807-1868), a leading Scottish theologian, defines *jure divino* government in the following manner:

The form and arrangement of ecclesiastical government have not been left to be fixed by the wisdom of man, nor reduced to the level of a question of mere Christian expediency, but have been determined by Divine authority, and are sufficiently exhibited in Scripture In respect of its government and organization, as well as in respect of its doctrine and ordinances, the Church is of God, and not of man Scripture, rightly interpreted and understood, affords sufficient materials for determining what the constitution and order of the Christian society were intended by its Divine Founder to be. In express Scripture precept, in apostolic example, in the precedent of the primitive Churches while under inspired direction, and in general principles embodied in the New Testament, they believe that it is possible to find the main and essential features of a system of

4. Waters, *How Jesus Runs the Church*, pp. 11-12.

Church government which is of Divine authority and universal obligation. They believe that the Word of God embodies the general principles and outline of ecclesiastical polity, fitted to be an authoritative model for all Churches, capable of adapting itself to the exigencies of all different times and countries, and, notwithstanding, exhibiting a unity of character and arrangement in harmony with the Scripture pattern. Church government, according to this view, is not a product of Christian discretion, nor a development of the Christian consciousness; it has been shaped and settled, not by the wisdom of man, but by that of the Church's Head. It does not rest upon a ground of human expediency, but on Divine Appointment.⁵

A 'divine right' Presbyterian form of government in the church is often contrasted with a government by *jure humano* (by human right). Bannerman describes the position:

The form of government for [the] church should be left to the discretion and judgment of its members, and should be adjusted by them to suit the circumstances of the age, or country, or civil government with which they stand connected . . . there is no scriptural model of Church government set up for the imitation of Christians at all times, nor any particular form of it universally binding . . . Christian expediency, guided by a discriminating regard to the advantage and necessities of the Church at the moment, is the only rule to determine its outward organization, and the only directory of Church government.⁶

Finally, another definition needs brief introduction: Erastianism.⁷ This term will occur at various points in this book, especially with regard to the church's relationship to the state and vis-a-versa. A. A. Hodge clearly explains the view:

5. James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ: A Treatise on the Nature, Power, Ordinances, Discipline and Government of the Christian Church*, 2 vols. (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1960), 2:202. Quoted in Waters, *How Jesus Runs The Church*, p. 43. For one of the most full-bodied explanations and defenses of this view, see *Jus Divinum Regiminis Ecclesiastici, or The Divine Right of Church-Government, Originally Asserted by the Ministers of Sions College, London, December 1646*. Revised and edited by David Hall (reprint, Dallas, TX: Naphtali, 1995). Of historical interest to some readers might be the fact that when Reformed Theological Seminary was begun in 1964, one of the bedrock distinctives on which it was started was *jure divino* Presbyterianism. See Frank Joseph Smith, *The History of the Presbyterian Church in America: The Continuing Church Movement* (Manassas, VA: Reformation Heritage Foundation, 1985), p. 51.

6. Ibid. Quoted in Waters, *How Jesus Runs the Church*, p. 42.

7. The view is integrally connected with Thomas Erastus (1524-1583), a Swiss theologian and physician.

This doctrine regards the State as a divine institution, designed to provide for all the wants of men, spiritual as well as temporal, and that is consequently charged with the duty of providing for the dissemination of pure doctrine and for the proper administration of the sacraments and of discipline. It is the duty of the civil magistrate, therefore, to support the Church, to appoint its officers, to define its laws, and to superintend their administration. Thus in the State Churches of Protestant Germany and England the sovereign is the supreme ruler of the Church as well as of the State, and the civil magistrate has chosen and imposed the confessions of the faith, the system of government, the order of worship, and the entire course of ecclesiastical administration.⁸

During some of the history we will be referring to below, a prominent view of the civil power and ecclesiastical power during the sixteenth and seventeenth century was that the magistrate had authority in church matters as well as civil. This was the case especially with regard to church discipline.⁹ The Westminster Assembly debated these views vigorously, but at the end of the day they chose not to embrace Erastianism, but to enshrine the view that there are distinctions between ecclesiastical and civil power.¹⁰

It is often overlooked in the modern age that quite a bit of what God saw fit to say in his holy Scripture is said to a body of believers, and not just to individuals. Such a claim should delight N.T. Wright, who complains rightly about the reduction of the gospel, that Christians in the West have been too focused accenting individual salvation and going to heaven.¹¹

Why a Spiritual Mission?

Bannerman stated eloquently this great truth about the church of the Lord: the church is a home with a warm hearth for Christians:

One of the grand offices which the Christian Church has to discharge in the world is thus to be the centre and home of union to believing men, and to become a sanctuary, within which Christians may meet, and enjoy in

8. A. A. Hodge, *The Confession of Faith: A Handbook of Christian Doctrine Expounding The Westminster Confession* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1869; reprint 1958), p. 298.

9. See the discussion in J. V. Fesko, *The Theology of the Westminster Standards: Historical Context and Theological Insights* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), pp. 299-301.

10. Ibid. See below, Chapters 13 and 14 especially.

11. N. T. Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began: Reconsidering the Meaning of Jesus's Crucifixion* (San Francisco, CA: Harper One, 2016).

common their spiritual privileges, and find that those privileges are doubled because shared in common.¹²

However, another of Bannerman's claims, and perhaps the greatest of his life's achievements, was to argue for the separation of the church and the state. It's as if he assumed the position that Christ is ruler of all; however, he manifests his rule in different ways. Christ rules the civil sphere and he rules the ecclesiastical sphere; nevertheless, Bannerman assumes a fine distinction often forgotten in modern times:

The state, or the ordinance of civil government, owes its origin to God as the *universal Sovereign and Ruler among nations*. The Church, as the visible society of professing Christians in the world, with its outward provision of authority and order and government, owes its origin to *Christ as Mediator*.¹³

Another way of identifying this is that there is the *regnum gratiae* (the 'kingdom of grace') and the *regnum potentiae* (the kingdom of power). The kingdom of power is universal, general or natural – that is, Christ's rule is manifest over the world and its affairs especially through the civil magistrate. Yet, Christ's rule here historically has been understood not in his role as mediator, but as the second person of the Trinity. The 'kingdom of grace' is Christ's rule over the church militant where he governs, blesses, and defends the church in its earthly pilgrimage for the sake of the salvation of believers. These basic categories—that God rules the church as a redeemer (a spiritual kingdom) and rules the state and all other social institutions (the civil kingdom) as creator and sustainer—have been widely held by Reformed thinkers for centuries until the modern period.¹⁴ In addition, until the nineteenth century, there was basically a positive posture towards natural law; until then it was thought that natural law and reason cohered and derived their status 'as Christian authority because of scripture's own revealed word about creation and God's sovereign design therein.'¹⁵

12. Bannerman, *The Church of Christ*, p. 92.

13. *Ibid.*, 97 [emphasis added].

14. See David VanDrunen, *Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms: A Study in the Development of Reformed Social Thought*, Emory Studies in Law and Religion, John Witte Jr., general editor (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010).

15. Christopher R. Seitz, *Figured out: Typology and Providence in Christian Scripture* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), p. 60.

Without this bedrock truth, any attempt to describe the primary mission of the church will collapse. Without this skeleton of strong bones, any form we give to the question of what the primary mission of the church is will be flaccid and distorted. This truth, i.e., that God rules over the entire universe, including the church, but with necessary distinctions with regard to how he rules, is a crucial distinction. This axiomatic truth, together with his recognition of the ramifications of the visible and invisible church (more below), had a profound influence on how Bannerman thought about the primary mission of the church. First and foremost, he recognized that the primary function of the church is spiritual. He says, for example, “The era of the Christian Church is emphatically that of the manifestation of the Spirit; and the administration of the Church is, in its primary character, *a spiritual one*.”¹⁶ For Bannerman, this means the church does have a *primary mission*. He writes in his classic on ecclesiology: ‘the Church of Christ has been instituted by Him for the purpose of advancing and upholding the work of grace on the earth, being limited, in its primary object, to promoting the spiritual interests of the Christian community among which it is found.’¹⁷

Fast forward to the next generation. This same principle was stated eloquently by J.G. Machen, the founder of the denomination in which I serve:

The responsibility of the church in the new age is the same as its responsibility in every age. It is to testify that this world is lost in sin; that the span of human life—nay, all the length of human history—is an infinitesimal island in the awful depths of eternity; that there is a mysterious holy living God, Creator of all, Upholder of all, infinitely beyond all; that he has revealed himself in his Word and offered us communion with himself through Jesus Christ the Lord; that there is no other salvation, for individuals or for nations, save this.¹⁸

16. Ibid., p. 25 [emphasis his].

17. Ibid., p. 98.

18. J. Gresham Machen, ‘The Responsibility of the Church in Our New Age,’ *The Presbyterian Guardian* 36:1 (January 1967), p. 13. Machen (1881-1937), a Professor at Princeton Theological Seminary, was a staunch defender of Orthodoxy in his day. This led him to found Westminster Theological Seminary in 1929 and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church in 1936. He was born into a home that reflected the aristocratic south (see, D. G. Hart, ‘Doctor Fundamentalism: An intellectual biography of J. Gresham Machen, 1881-1937’ [Ph.D. dissertation, The Johns Hopkins University, 1988], pp. 27-28). Some of the consequences of this influence will be discussed below in the book.

The church's greatest corporate expression of compassion towards the world is to preach the good news of Jesus Christ. My claim in this book is the same: The church *is spiritual* and its mission *is spiritual*. The church, corporately, should stick to its job description. When she does not, the result is fuzzy boundaries. *When I use the term 'spiritual' in this book, or the phrase 'the spirituality of the church', I am referring to those things that are properly of and properly belonging to the church.*

Even so, it does not follow that this emphasis on the primary mission of the church as spiritual signifies that her business is only with non-physical matters. The power given to the church is spiritual; however, 'That does not mean it is invisible and completely internal, for though Christ is a spiritual king, he rules over both body and soul. His Word and sacrament are directed to the whole person. The ministry of mercy attends to the physical needs of human beings.'¹⁹ Nor does it mean that Christians should neglect the poor, nor turn a blind eye to social injustices (although it might have entailments for *how* the church, or individual members, address those concerns and issues). After all, there are a number of areas both moral and civil where the Bible clearly has something to say. In other words, there are very few 'purely political' issues.²⁰ Nor does it mean that we should neglect distinct areas of authority that God gave to the church as her primary mission. A brief reflection on preaching, administering the sacraments, administering church discipline, let alone visiting the sick and dying, and providing for the financially destitute within the church hardly resembles a non-material other-worldliness! Truly.

Nevertheless, as Craig Troxel has written, there is an increasing pressure for the church to incorporate concerns for peace and justice, social malaise and injustices, poverty, and so on into the corporate mission of the church.²¹ The fact that the primary mission of the church in her

19. Herman Bavink, *Reformed Dogmatics: Holy Spirit, Church, and New Creation*, Vol. 4, John Bolt ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 4. pp. 414-15.

20. See, e.g., the discussion by David VanDrunen, *Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms*, pp. 264-65.

21. Craig Troxel, 'The World Is Not Enough: The Priority of the Church in Christ's Cosmic Headship,' in *Confident of Better Things: Essays Commemorating Seventy-Five Years of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church*, ed. by John R. Muether and Danny E. Olinger (Willow Grove, PA: Committee for the Historian, 2011): pp. 337-66, especially at p. 362.