

THE NATURE AND SCOPE  
OF PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

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*This is the second installment of Professor Dr. Samuel Volbeda's four-hour lecture given in 1939 to the alumni of Westminster Theological Seminary.*

*For the sake of continuity in reading the last two paragraphs of the first installment are here reproduced.*

We have now canvassed the three fundamental relations which God's people sustain to him (the covenantal, the ecclesiastical and the *basileion*). It is now incumbent upon us to study the inter-relation binding these three several relations pervading it. They are after all three strands of one cord. For all these relations alike bind us to God: we are members at once of his covenant, of his church, and his commonwealth. And all the several children of God sustain everyone of these three relations to God normally.

The investigation of these inter-relations binding together the three projections of human life terminating upon God, will bring interesting facts to our attention. Let us begin our explorations by recalling that the covenant of God's grace is the matrix of spiritual or regenerate life and that the kingdom of God is the field of the believer's service to his heavenly Father.

*The interrelationship of covenant and kingdom*

Life, such as is generated within the precincts of the covenant, is the power that enables us to do the work of the kingdom of God. Conversely, the work of the kingdom is the *raison d'etre* of the bestowal upon us of the blessed life of

the covenant. The power of spiritual life, then, is determined qualitatively. It is possessed of a definitely *basileion* entelechy. The moment its intrinsic potency is provoked to action, it moves in the direction of the kingdom of God; it crystallizes definitely in the good works of the kingdom. Covenantal life and kingdom service are related as one root and flower or fruit. No other flower can blossom on covenant soil through the cultivation of God's world to the praise of his glorious name. All prostitution of the work, which is God's by absolute right, to other purposes than *theodoxy* is by that token anti-covenantal and does not result in the genuine cultivation of God's world, but in its devastation.

When Adam had sinned, God cursed the ground; that is, he let Adam's transgression work itself out, within limits of his own sovereign and kind prescription, in Adam's home and field of labor. It is a bad mistake to think that an atheistic culture, such as we witness today, is a flower beautiful in God's sight, whose odor is fragrant to his nostrils, or that it is a fruit delightful to his divine taste. A godless civilization is comparable to the unspiritual worship of which we read in Isaiah 1:10-15. In, let us say, technical respect Israel's ritual performances were meticulously correct. And admirable is the technology and technique of worship. Yet Israel provoked Jehovah's profound disgust. Thus said Jehovah: "I cannot away with iniquity and the solemn meeting," i.e., I will not deny that your meetings are solemn, but the iniquity that parallels them renders them worse than nugatory. "Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hateth; they are a trouble unto me; I am weary of bearing them. And when you spread forth your hands, I will hide mine eyes from you." Precisely that is, *mutatis mutandis*, God's appraisal of and corresponding attitude toward a *kultur* that is not rooted in the covenant, that is not instinctive with its own peculiar life, that does not breathe its distinctive spirit.

It is more than time God's people erase the thinking that God applies a quantitative and technological standard in his

estimation of the worth of man's work. The absoluteness of God postulates the canon: All or nothing. Quality such as he requires is present, or it is absent. It is not implied that God *can* not, *will* not, *does* not utilize, in his own inscrutable way, what in his absolute holiness and sovereignty he does not approve and accept. It is his divine prerogative to do what the Dutch call: *Een rechte slag slaan met een kromme stok*, or as one might render it, to cause light to break forth from darkness or to make life spring from death. The superlatively significant doctrine of the covenant must be put forward in the spirit of our Reformed fathers. Dr. Gerhardus Vos' *De Verbondsleer in der Gereformeerde Theologie* should be a *vade mecum* (in translation, of course) of every minister. A covenant-minded Christian will be ecclesiastically loyal and zealous for God's kingdom.

It is needful to warn not only against divorcing kingdom service from covenant life, but also against disassociating covenant life from kingdom service. The first-mentioned vice is typically worldly; the second error is deeply entrenched in Christian circles.

It may serve a good purpose to lay down, at this juncture, the principle that spiritual life is not an end in itself, no *Selbstzweck*, but a means to an end. Strictly speaking, one cannot enjoy life. Life is a means of attaining to enjoyment. Through life, eternal life alone, the sinner may arrive at the blessedness of knowing the only true God and Jesus Christ whom he sent into this world to seek and to save that which was lost. If man seized this life for himself, literally everything, all in heaven and on earth, would tend unfailingly to vex man's spirit, to irritate man's soul, to embitter his life. The wicked have no peace, saith the Lord God. Only God's common grace prevents man from sucking the tincture of gall from every object that meets his gaze or engages his mind.

Spiritual life is not comparable to capital, upon which its possessor may draw for happiness. Possession of life without

its devoted exercise yields no more satisfaction than capital held but not invested yields revenue. And whereas uninvested capital might remain intact, life not going into action soon declines, decays; it withers and wanes and becomes extinct.

Now for life to be active and fruitful it cannot merely turn and terminate upon itself reflexively, like a revolving wheel, any given point of which ever and anon returns to its former point in space. It must act on, and react to, some object extraneous to itself. Otherwise it is like electric current that is not grounded; it ceases to flow and fails to produce action. It is God, from whom spiritual life derives, to whom it must project itself in response to the gravitational pull he exerts upon it through his Spirit; thus it develops capacity for action. Only when contact with God has been established through faith, does it bristle with energy. But it would be a mistake to think that life can link itself up with God *an sich*. Contrary to the vaporings of pantheism, there is indeed a *Gott an sich*. For the transcendence of God implies that he does not arrive at the adequate expression (manifestation) of his infinite being in the finite world he made and constantly sustains, though the God who contacts the world dynamically in his immanence is identical with the God who infinitely transcends it. To put it otherwise, the God of whom we must predicate *an-sichheit*, if we would not construe him naturalistically, is the God who discloses his identity to us after he made us and by that token endowed us with capacity for active relationship to him on our own part. If life then is to touch God, it can only do so insofar as he is *deus sese revelans atque revelatus*. Only in his light do we see light. We should never discover the sun that carries the earth along in its course of many millions of miles, if it did not itself mediate that discovery by its own immense effulgence. So too God must be seen in his own light. If either that light be withdrawn or the spiritual eye of man becomes sightless because his soul has become lifeless, an inky darkness ensues for man and in

his folly sinful man, bereft of sight but big with insufferable pride, scornfully declares that there is no God and adding deeds to words goes through life without God. Of course, God does not suspend his revelation, and to his people he gives life, life unending, and eyes enlightened. But on this basic fact of revelation the vital contact of the soul with God is and always will be absolutely dependent.

*Covenantal life nourished by God's self-revelation*

We are now prepared to take the next step in the direction of understanding life's inherent need of going out of itself in order to realize its own possibilities. It must now be set forth that in order to establish connection with the *deus sese revelans atque revelatus* man must come across the chasm that separates the infinite God and the finite world to which he belongs over the bridge of those means of which God makes use in revealing himself to man. To see the sidereal sun it is not necessary to travel ninety-four million miles through space. The telescope of the eye brings it within the chamber of our perceiving self that is back of the eye. But the distance vision of and long distance calls to God do not satisfy the religious instincts of the creature made in his image and declaring passionately: "It is good for me to draw nigh unto God," and "when shall I go in and appear before Him"? He would not merely behold God from afar; he longs to rest on God's very bosom, to hold him in the loving embrace of faith, to feel the everlasting arms underneath. God knows this, of course. Therefore his Spirit directs James to write (4:8) "Draw nigh to God and He will draw nigh to you." For, be it remembered, God himself, in his great eternal love, yearns to enfold his dear child in his strong arms and to press him to his bosom.

The *media revelationis* bringing knowledge of God must, therefore, also serve the purpose of *media communicationis et communionis*. God must not merely swim into our mental view; he must personally come within the reach of our short arms. He must in very person stand before us, face to face

with us. Revelation does both: it must acquaint us with him and put us in possession of him. These *media revelationis* are threefold: the cosmos as God's creation providence-sustained; Scripture as the infallibly inspired record of God's gracious dealings with fallen man; and Christ, the incarnate Son of God in whom redemption is embodied objectively.

At this pass we are interested particularly in the first: God's great and marvelous cosmos, although the others too must be dealt with, be it but in the passing, with a view to an adequate understanding of the matter in hand. Creation, then, is the meeting ground of God and man. Man cannot possibly meet God in that unapproachable light in which God *an sich* dwells in infinite serenity. Man is but creature. Hence it is impossible for him to dwell on the plane of deity on which the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit meet and mingle, live and love. The cosmos to which man belongs and which is the translation of God's eternal ideas into historical reality through the power of his almighty will is the level to which God condescends, in order there to live with man in the full fellowship of sweetest love. As a medium of communication and communion of man with God it is adequate to man's needs. As a being that is at once God's creature and his glorious image, man is adequate to the possibility of communication and communion with God wrought through creation into the cosmos. But the point to be made expressly and specifically is that it is simply impossible for man to find God and to fellowship with him outside the bounds of God's cosmos. In the superlatively rare air of God's pure transcendence man cannot breathe at all. He is but man, as God repeatedly reminds him in his Word, not God!

This is a truth, sinful man, even the sinful saint, is prone to forget or, at least, to discount since not only natural man neglects this truth. Mysticism, even in Christian circles, has often proceeded upon the gratuitous assumption that absolutely immediate contact with God may indeed be established. Great mystics have striven strenuously, and as they

mistakenly believed successfully, to shed their cosmic accoutrements completely and to have approached God verily in their naked ego. Consistency has led them to assume a derogatory attitude toward the Scriptures no less than to the cosmic basis of their own life. It need not surprise us. For the Scripture, as *Scriptures*, wear a markedly cosmic aspect, insofar as the secondary authors are involved and inscription is, of course, a decidedly material process. It has been noticed, too, that mysticism in some instances has betrayed docetic leanings Christologically. This *acosmism* springs from the neglect or denial of the canon of religion, that man cannot commune with God on any other plane than his own creatural, i.e., cosmic level. Fundamentally the neglect or negation of this truth is born of pantheism. It is small wonder that mysticism has in more than one instance openly avowed the pantheism that is its secret tap-root.

The classical evidence of the truth set forth in the preceding statement is the perpetuity of the incarnation of the Son of God. "*In Christ*," the Word become flesh and forever remaining man, is the ever-recurring predication made of salvation and all that it implies in the New Testament. In the second person of the adorable Trinity, born of a woman and thus become like man in all things sin alone excepted, God related himself organically to the cosmos. By so much he made it the natural plane of his own life, without a moment's prejudice to his eternal and infinite level of divine existence. Meanwhile it must not be forgotten that we view the matter from our point of vantage as sinners saved by grace from the ruin of sin, and relate the Messianic naturalization of God as a denizen of his own world to our hamartiological and soteriological background. But the matter may also be regarded from the angle of which God from everlasting meant to be a state of ideal and glorified perfection tending *ad majorem gloriam Dei*. We do not yet know just how our association with Christ and in him with God will be in the land of glory. But we do know two things. First, that we shall be with God's Son made flesh forever and ever.

Second, that in him, with whom we shall eternally dwell in intimate fellowship, God will somehow manifest himself to us in a mode not merely spiritual. For in Christ dwelleth all the Godhead bodily! For if Christ could say in the state of his humiliation to Philip, when the latter was in a state not merely of earthly imperfection but also of spiritual immaturity, "He that hath seen me [physically, is implied] hath seen the Father" in response to Philip's demand: "Show us the Father" (John 14:9), we may well draw the conclusion to which utterance was given above.

### *The unique role of Scripture*

It remains to say a few words about Scripture as a means of communion with God. It differs from creation and Christ in that, unlike these, it is not destined to be permanent. It serves its mediational purpose as long as Christ is absent from the earth to which his incarnation has forever related him organically. In a sense and in a measure it takes his place in the interim. Thus he speaks to us as if he were with us. When Christ shall himself dwell among his people on earth in his perennial glory, the biblical surrogate will neither be needed nor put to further use. But in the period of Christ's protracted absence in the country far away, his people on earth can hear his voice only insofar as it resounds from the page of Holy Writ through the Holy Spirit's gracious influence.

The situation then is as follows: God communes with his people in Christ whose life has, through the incarnation, been linked organically with the cosmos. Christ is temporarily absent personally from his flock on earth. While distant from them he communicates with them by means of pen and ink, adding, in the words of III John 14: "But I hope shortly to see thee and we shall speak face to face." How Christ communes with the disembodied spirits of the saints in glory is very hard to understand. One thing is certain: the Scriptures have there been superceded by means suited to

the exigencies of the intermediate state. But believers on earth are under necessity to walk by the light of Scripture, if they would be nigh unto God in Christ.

We have hitherto elaborated the proposition that the task of God's people--Practical Theology is theology insofar as it deals with a task, a *pragma*--has a *cosmic* background and framework, and is performed in the power of the endless life of God's gracious covenant. For the life of God's people is related to God *covenantally* and after a *basileion* fashion. The waters of their spiritual life descend from the highlands of God's covenant grace. After passing through the reservoir of their soul, they inundate the wide fields of God's world in which they live, and make them wave with abounding harvests of glory to God and delight to God's angels and happiness for themselves.

Before entering upon the *ecclesiastical* phase of the great project God has undertaken, apropos of determining to *what* practice specifically Practical Theology has reference, it may be observed that the dispensation of time (not that of eternity), is the season of labor for God's people. God's cosmic activity is the prototype of man's career. God made the world in six days and then rested on the seventh. This rest was to be permanent, and was to consist in the enjoyment of the fruits of his handiwork, as distinct, although not disassociated from, the rest which God enjoys in the infinite tranquility of his self-sufficient divine being.

The sabbath of God's *world-rest* was to pass through the stages of world-existence. The first was the era of world-development *in time*; the second was the era of world-harvest-joy in eternity. When sin broke out like a conflagration in God's world, his eternal plan called for the extinction of the flames not only but also for the re-building of the house that had been badly damaged. Accordingly God now entered upon a new course of action, viz., the redemption which is in Christ Jesus and which will be finished in the restoration of all things of which Peter spoke at Jerusalem in

the days of Pentecost. This period of rehabilitation coincides with man's period of world-work, a work, that is, corresponding to God's creative activity.

As a result, the rest of God after the completion of salvation eschatologically which will consist in the divine enjoyment of the *joint* results of creation and redemption, and the rest that God's people will attain, take their inception simultaneously. When judgment shall have been consummated and the new earth and the new heavens shall have issued from the purifying fires of the last days, the resurrected saints with Christ at their head shall enter into a beatific participation of God's world-rest, that is, with God enjoy the great works of God in which constructive development they shall have been engaged in their temporal career on earth. The everlasting joys of heaven, which will fill the hearts of God's people forever, will be in the nature of the happiness that a full harvest brings to a husbandman. Obviously the harvest will be not so much the undoubted benefits of *Paradise Regained* (Milton) as the glory of its Maker, Sustainer, Governor, which it will reflect most brightly into the happy face of God in Christ and even into his jubilant heart itself. Radiating in all directions, this glory will be the golden light flooding the habitation of God and his people forever.

This state of affairs, which I have but feebly reported, is the predestined end toward which the whole creation and its wondrous redemption moves slowly but surely as the ages roll on. According to the rule that which is first in intention is last in execution, the situation indicated above, namely, the eternal feast of earth's harvest reaped in time, will be not only the finale of history but also the goal that determines life on earth in time. It is therefore not accidental that the barns of eternity will be full with the golden grain brought in from the fields of time. Indeed, God's world-eternity, in distinction from his own personal and intrinsically divine everlastingness, will be precisely and specifically the sabbatic enjoyment of the great things he wrought in creation

and redeemed and restored by his grace in Christ through the Holy Spirit. Any other view than that just propounded tears earth and heaven, time and eternity, God and his people apart, radically contrary to the regulative principle of the ontological unity of God. Hence we must necessarily disagree with the mystics who refuse to own and utilize the *pou sto* of creation which man needs absolutely, seeing he is not like deity, a self-existent and self-sufficient being.

If the proposition laid down above be accepted, it will impart tone and color to our world-and-life view. A divinely appointed *pensum* and a human *praxis* in executing it will constitute the program of life in this world. The *sowing-reaping* scheme that life assumes, congruous with the conception of heaven and eternity, will preserve us from the dead and deadening *harvest-fest* mechanicalness that is the tone of our day. It will also help us to go our way every day and to do our work wherever it must be done in the impressive consciousness that the finality of life is not in what we accomplish here and now, but in the harvest which the threshing engines of judgment will bring to light. This whole construction, as briefly stated above, makes life at once tremendously serious and enormously inspirational. Only in the event life ultimates not in the markets of the life that now is but in the granaries of the world to come is it really worth while and can it be the subject-matter of an epic such as only One far greater than the illustrious bard of Chios could ever compose.

*The church in relation to covenant and kingdom*

I now return to the *ecclesiastical* relation which believers in Christ sustain to their God and Father.

It may not be amiss that I engage in a bit of re-orientation. It was remarked that the corporation called God's people sustain a triple relation to God: a covenantal, an ecclesiastical and a *basileion* relation, respectively. The first and the last of these three relations have been considered in the preceding discussions. The second did not yet

receive more than preliminary attention, despite the circumstance of our present purpose, namely, the study of Practical Theology with a view to determining what the practice is specifically. The covenantal and *basileion* relations are of peripheral and not of central interest. However, the three are a triple chord and our *paramount* interest in the second strand does not imply that the first and third strands are negligible. The point I have been endeavoring to make is that our ecclesiastical relation to God cannot be *rightly*, and certainly not *fully* understood, unless it be clearly seen in the perspectives of the *alpha* of the covenant relation and the *omega* of the *basileion* relation to God. The church as a particular institution means *nothing*, unless spiritual vitality, deriving from God's gracious covenant, surge up into its framework and fill every part thereof and thereby make the entire organization vibrant with the powers of an *organism*. A mere organization is a dead mechanism. It is covenant life alone that will put heavenly energies at the service of ecclesiastical agencies. Likewise the organized church should be definitely related to the kingdom of God as it has come down from God out of heaven into this world and among men. As soon as a church begins to live unto itself instead of being a feeder for the kingdom and a stimulus to the kingdom-activity, it develops the mortal malady of ecclesiasticism. Mortal, I say, because the covenant life that is not conducted *through* the church, pipe-line like, but shut up reservoir-like in the church, will cease to flow and will find other channels and outlets. Then we perceive the *unecclesiastical-mindedness*, the *carentia sensus ecclesiastici*, that marks sectarianism and is fast becoming the vogue today in this land of ours.

It will, then, appear that our ecclesiastical relation to God cannot be viewed independently of a rather close inspection of our covenantal and *basileion* relation, respectively, to God. In going into the matter of our ecclesiastical relation to God a bit *au fond*, it is not necessary to explore the whole concept of the church. We are now interested only in the

*ecclesiastical institution.* It is, of course, not intimated that the latter can be properly understood apart from the other facets of this coronal jewel of the Lord Jesus Christ. In fact, the institution called the church cannot be rightly understood, unless account be taken seriously of the entire Scripture notion of the *ekklesia*. At this time the non-institutional features of the church will come into view sufficiently when we seek to make clear what the institutional church is *qua talis*.

In the triad: covenant, church and kingdom, church means the ecclesiastical organization as such. In respect of constituency, spirit and relation to God and Christ, covenant, church and kingdom are not disparate but identical. Only if church be taken organizationally is it distinguishable from covenant and kingdom, and are the latter distinguishable from it.

This observation at once leads to another, namely, that the covenant and the kingdom too are viewed in this nexus of thought as organized entities. The covenant is institutionalized in the family according to the formula of the covenant: "I am thy God and the God of thy seed after thee." It may be remarked in passing that the family is not a *special* creation for covenant purposes. If this were otherwise, there would be no family life outside the bounds of God's covenant. But the family is not restricted to God's people. Some families are vessels of grace, others are not, alas. Both alike, Christian and unchristian families, are adapted to covenant contents, as appears when a converted father exclaims: "I and my house, we will serve the Lord." But some are instinct with covenant life, while in others this covenant life was never present or grew extinct after it had once been phenomenologically present. It will occur to all that the family, being the aboriginal structural principle of covenant life, is of fundamental importance for the preservation of the covenant itself and the conservation of its blessed vital energies. But nobody who is at all conversant with the domestic situation that obtains today can have

failed to perceive that the family has long since been undermined on a large scale and is fast collapsing in many circles. The damage involved in the ruin of the family and brought about by disregarding the divinely ordained relation of husband and wife, the practice of revolutionary pedagogy, the dissolution through divorce of the marriage relation, the creation of an away-from-home atmosphere, etc., is incalculable, both for society at large and for the church. Particularly for the church, because the covenant is the vital power of the church, and the covenant necessarily falls into abeyance if the family is destroyed. With the family in process of disintegration, the very foundation of the church is being removed. The church is beginning to topple before our very eyes.

The kingdom comes to structural expression in the social forms that arise naturally out of life. Its organization, like that of the covenant, is therefore, ordinary and not special. For the rest there is a difference that is fraught with considerable importance. The family is the basic unit of society. Hence its structure is simple, not complex. Besides, it is purely natural, not artificial, not constructive. For that reason it is not variable but constant. But society is a compound, its constitution is, to a degree, arbitrary, artificial, variable. For example, the state is universal, indeed, but its morphology is highly variant not only chronologically but also contemporaneously. Schools there have been for long, but how vastly, for example, the modern university differs from its medieval prototype.

Now the kingdom of God in its temporal stages of progress has passed through various phases in respect of its social and structural embodiment. In its patriarchal stage, with social development hardly begun apart from incipient inter-family relations, the kingdom of God was largely domestic in its configurations. In the Mosaic era the theocracy rises into view. Being a prefiguration of the social structure that is to obtain in the world to come, it is naturally unique, destined as it was to pass away upon Christ's

advent and precisely because it was a shadow and not the body itself. Christ's appearance was not attended with the inauguration of the real theocracy, seeing its realistic foundations had not yet been laid by the shedding of Christ's atoning blood and the universal groundwork for its erection had not yet been wrought through missionary endeavor. Only at his second advent will it be ushered in. Instead of crystallizing in an institution definitely its own and by that token distinctive, the kingdom of God steals, spirit-like, into existing institutions and social structures, and leaven-like influences their life and activity in the direction of its own specific character.

The point to be made clearly is that the kingdom of God, as being the rule of God over men of flesh and blood living their life in a material world, can not possibly be *amorphous*. If it receives not embodiment in form of its *own*, it must--and it does--seek expression structurally in the existing forms of society.

#### *The church as a matter of expediency*

Returning now to the ecclesiastical organization of the people of God, it should be observed first of all that this set-up is *special*. It is a *new* creation, effected for a very definite purpose. It is not natural, in the sense of springing spontaneously and directly from life, as does the family and its ramifications in society. Hence only Christianity presents the spectacle of church. It is insofar artificial and mechanical. Instead of springing organically out of life and being, by that token, an integral element of the vital organism of humanity, it is super-imposed upon life from without. It has been argued of late (Schilder) that the ecclesiastical organization as such is organically related to the body organized. But his argument is hardly convincing. It must, in fact, capitulate before the historic fact that God's people were not ecclesiastically organized in a real sense during the Old Testament. Mankind has never been without the family organization and incipient of more or less mature social

constructions. But the ecclesiastical organization with which we are familiar emerges at a relatively late hour of the day. Obviously it is not an *organic* need. It is a matter of expediency. It is well to remember this, if we would not mistakenly conceive of ecclesiastical organization as having intrinsic worth and therefore desirable for its own sake.

However, to say that ecclesiastical organization is not itself a vital part of the organism of God's people is not tantamount at all to saying that it does not serve a useful purpose, or that it is a crude contrivance loosely attached to the organism and cramping its life. The view just repudiated has been held by some, but it is nevertheless far from correct. In fact, more than one of the social forms of life serving a truly useful purpose bears little or no relation directly to the inner life of mankind. It suffices if there be adaptation, and the more the better, of the organization introduced to the organism concerned. An organism may function through an organization added somewhat mechanically so naturally as if the latter were a veritable part of itself. A school may be instanced as a striking example of the situation referred to. It is itself a mechanical set-up, designed to serve as an extension of the pedagogical function of the family. If properly integrated in the community, the Christian community let us say, which it serves, it may to all practical purposes be a virtual enlargement of the organisms of the several families represented.

It would be a disastrous error to conceive of the ecclesiastical organization of the people of God as related to them merely in a conjunctive way. We are not interested so much in the organization of the church as in the church insofar as it is organized. *What* is organized, namely God's people or the Body of Christ, is far more important than the relatively ephemeral circumstance *that* it is organized or the organization *as such*. The organization commands our interest only in the measure in which it is the organization of God's people. There is but one people of God and that people of God is organized covenantally in the family and after

a *basileion* fashion in human society. In addition it is organized in what we call the church ecclesiastically conceived. But it is always one and the same people of God. There is no other *laos tou theou*. Hence the church of which we speak in this connection is the covenant constituency and the royal priesthood bringing its holy life to expression in a *new special*, relationship called *ecclesiastical*.

*The church as essential for spiritual life*

At this juncture the question may be raised why are the covenantal and *basileion* arguments, respectively, not sufficient unto the full expression of the life of God's people dynamically. If the question be thus phrased, it should at once be replied that they are sufficient thereto, indeed, and that the ecclesiastical organization is not intended to suffer a third coordinate exponent of Christian life.

We are now face to face with the fact that in a *pragmatic* respect the church is of an entirely different nature than the covenant or the kingdom of God. The latter two relate themselves directly to God: the covenant as community of life with God, the kingdom as cooperation with God in the realization of his glorious world-purposes. The church, meaning thereby the people of God insofar as *ecclesiastically* organized, relates itself *directly* to the covenant and the kingdom, and only indirectly through these intermediaries to the God of the covenant and the kingdom. Its function is purely ancillary, accessory, instrumental. It serves to link the covenant and the kingdom together by training the membership of the covenant for service to the Lord as citizens of the kingdom, and in particular to cultivate the spiritual life of God's covenant people, in order that it may bear much fruit in devoted kingdom service in all manner of good works. The *basileion* power of God's people lies in their covenant life. This life must be nurtured in order that all the strength inhering in it potentially, and all the capacities resident in it naturally, may develop into a maximum of efficiency in the work of the Lord.

It is not implied that the family or the organization of covenant life is of no account on this score. But it may safely be said that the family is not adequate to the task of training the *militia Christi*. The parents of God's covenant little ones cannot alone train them completely, not even in respect of natural life as the rise and permanence of the school clearly prove. Few Christian parents indeed would be prepared to deny that they need the services of the church in equipping their children fully with the panoply of the Word of God and to cultivate their nascent spiritual life adequately. But even so the inadequacy of the family as the training school of the kingdom has not yet been demonstrated completely. The parents themselves are in need of instruction and training with a view to their own progressive development and maturation no less than to their task of bringing up their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. Hence an agency is needed to bring the covenant life of God's people, *both* young and old, to maturity and fecundity.

If it be inquired why the holy house was deemed wholly sufficient in the patriarchal era and largely sufficient in the Mosaic dispensation, the answer is not far to seek. Attention may be directed to two sets of circumstances as explaining why, in that hoary past, God deemed domestic training sufficient for kingdom service.

First, God's redemptive revelation was then elementary, very much so at first, and considerably so even at a relatively late date in the Old Testament dispensation as the epistle to the Hebrews points out. Spiritual development and kingdom service manifestly could not outrun revelation as progressively made by God according to his eternal plan. In a word, God's people were in their infancy at first and in their childhood and adolescence later on. Obviously less training, both extensively and intensively, is needed under such primitive circumstances. If human service were needed, as distinct from the services of angels, such required a level of development far in advance of the general state of spiritual progress. God either made some men organs of

revelation, thereby lifting them far above their ordinary selves and their contemporary fellow-believers, or he produced a state of accelerated spiritual development to meet a special need at a given time.

Second, the stage of cultural development in the ancient world, although not to be despised, is far behind the measure of cultural growth that began to obtain toward the time (fulness of time) when God sent his Son into the world. Citizenship in the kingdom of God at that stage of the world's history did not as much as begin to require the preparation, equipment and efficiency that became necessary when, under the stimulus of Christianity, mankind passed rapidly from adolescence into manhood. Besides, before Christ came into the world God's people were kept at home like children through the theocratic segregation that God had instituted at Sinai. They were not called upon to go out into all the world to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Instead of sending them as sheep among the wolves, as was God's later policy, he kept them secure in the shelter of the Palestinian fold. We may, then, conclude that the family and the rudimentary non-domestic religious organization of the theocracy sufficed to equip those who were but children (cf. Galatians) for the performance of their relatively simple duties.

But when the situation roughly sketched in the preceding discussion made place for world-Christianity, increased and more intensive training became imperatively necessary. For now all nations without exception were to be built into the kingdom of God. To do this, the works of Satan must be destroyed. Since conquest and annexation were the program and the order of the day, militancy naturally became the established policy. Besides, immediately upon the attainment of even initial victory, a huge task of reconstruction had to be undertaken. In a word, the reclamation of God's entire world and of all its several provinces in particular, in order that it might be wrested from the great usurper and restored to its rightful divine Owner and Ruler, is the program to

whose unremitting execution the people of God stand irrevocably committed. For to be in covenant with God means, first of all, community of life, indeed, but for that very reason involves solemn alliance with God such as binds the members of the covenant to cooperation with God in the conquest of Satan and the reoccupation of God's world.

*The mission of the church in the world*

It is expedient now to contemplate the measure of this kingdom task of rebuilding the world for God, in order that it may become the more apparent how highly necessary the divinely appointed labors of the New Testament church are. When God set in operation his plan of segregation by calling Abram out of Ur of the Chaldees, he abandoned the nations in large measure to Satan whom they had elected to follow and serve after the deluge. Heathendom became the devil's domain. We of today can hardly imagine what the world is like, what family, social and civil life become, what fiendish incubus sits upon the spirits of men, what stygian darkness lies spread upon the land like a pall of death, what fatal miasma rises from the swamps of sin, if and when there is an *utter* absence of the light of redemptive revelation and of the saving grace of God in Christ, unless we repair to such corners of the earth as are still steeped in unmitigated paganism.

Into such a world Christianity was sent on a truly ambitious mission. Little imagination is needed to realize the furor which the missionary crusade of Christianity created in the infernal regions and in the demon-infested circumambient atmosphere of the earth, when the Son of God went out to war and rapidly growing numbers of Jews and especially of Gentiles followed in his gloriously triumphant train. The devil's impotent rage at his ignominious and progressive defeat by the very cross he had assiduously labored to erect for Christ had hardly abated, when the walls of his city gave way to the irresistible pressure of the gospel as God's power unto salvation and his lands were now dotted with churches,

while his own altars were demolished often beyond hope of repair. Upon seeing the kingdom of this world, which he had but shortly before boasted of having in his bag, slip gradually from his control, his fury knew no bounds. In his grim determination to do or to die, he hurled himself with all his might against the new kingdom as it marched westward from Jerusalem. Forward went the army of the living God. But, be it noted well, every inch of progress was fiercely resisted. The path of victory was stained with the blood of heroes of the faith.

Upon being forced to abandon territory right or left and to relinquish subjects without number, he bethought himself of ways and means to redeem his lost cause. He studied strategy: stop Christianity in its onward and victorious march he could not. He would attempt to corrupt its faith and so cut its nerve. He would essay to adulterate its life and so weaken a share of its invincible power. Disguised as an angel of light, he betook himself within the gates of the city grand and fair largely to bore from within, meanwhile keeping up outward resistance. His new policy was fraught with a surprising measure of success. Before long he was firmly although clandestinely entrenched within the citadel of the church. His victories began to register in corruption of doctrine and in pollution of life. Heresy in turn paved the way for outright infidelity, and unabashed depravity of life was the open prelude to downright worldliness, while worldliness was the last bridge to apostasy.

But while measurably successful, he did not succeed altogether. God in his faithfulness to his people led them back to the light when, in the great Reformation of the 16th century, he restored to them his Word which they had largely lost and forgotten. Through his spirit he guided them far into the truth of salvation by God's grace alone through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, as they diligently studied God's Word even at the peril of their lives.

Satan now hastily devised a third plan of attack. The Bible, and faith in it as God's infallible Word, had proved to be the rock-bound coast that called a halt to the proud waters of the devastating flood of heresy and unbelief. The Bible must now be discredited, if slowly yet surely, Satan told himself. He at once set out to accomplish this wicked purpose. But he proceeded craftily, in order to succeed in the face of the tradition of fifteen centuries that the Bible is the very Word of God. He first operated on the principle *divide et impera*: he split up Protestantism and consolidated Roman Catholicism. When heresy began to blossom, faith and spirituality declined proportionately. One hundred years after Luther's heroic stand at Worms, an Eli might have cried, "Ichabod," and died broken-hearted. Before long modern Jehoiakims whittled God's Word into the first destructive criticism.

Apostasy then gradually assumed the proportions of a *mass* movement. And no followers of the prince of darkness are more fanatical in their antagonism to God and his Christ than the renegades of Christianity. No longer restrained by conventional conformity and developing more zeal as they become more outwardly true to their inner selves, they grew mightily energetic in two directions. First, they industriously cleared away what they deemed the Christian debris of the ages. Second, they set about erecting the kingdom of the world upon the ruins of historic Christianity in fully modernized form. Meanwhile, discoveries, inventions, science and technique came to their aid in developing power, in spreading unbelief, in winning over public opinion. Consolidation became the watch word. For they knew it well; in unity there lies strength.

As to Christianity itself, true Christianity, it is badly divided. Worse, it has developed acute divisiveness. Furthermore it has been stricken with a severe case of inferiority complex. It is overawed by the might and valor and glamour of the apostate armies of the devil. It is miserably on the defensive; it is ready to propose a truce and to be

satisfied with toleration. It is faint-hearted, half-hearted. In some sections it has lost heart altogether. It is conciliatory, ready to compromise. Two camps may be distinguished. In one camp believers seek to rationalize their *de facto* attitude of retreat by telling themselves after the fashion of the old-time Anabaptist that segregation and seclusion is their prime duty and that God's world is lost and gone beyond recovery. They would flee it as a burning house. In the other camp they are strongly inclined to make themselves believe that after all modernism may be nearer the truth than once they would grant. They are beginning to weaken, to swerve, to turn, to follow the crowd, to align themselves with the majority, to purchase the good-will of their erstwhile adversaries and to prepare a berth for themselves in a world that is fast dechristianizing, that is paganizing.

In such a world God's people of today must maintain what is left of God's kingdom. They are called to strengthen its ramparts, rebuild its broken walls, redirect its central citadel, enlarge its bounds, restore its lost and ever-waning prestige, improve its machinery. And as they handle their trowels industriously, they must at the same time wield their swords effectively. They cannot build without fighting and they may not fight without building.

Since thought is always basic to practice--as the world realizes full well even in an age when anti-intellectualism is widely in vogue and pragmatism is a prevailing attitude--God's people must be strong doctrinally, educationally (press and schools, both Christian), and philosophically (fight along fundamental lines in trenches of the intellect dug deep). All this mental work can be done only if and when they take their stand openly, squarely, unreservedly, uncompromisingly, valiantly, militantly, enthusiastically, preservingly on the Word of God that liveth and abideth forever and that can make us wise unto salvation. Today this stand can be taken if God's people are prepared to bear the reproach of Christ, if need be physically as well as intellectually and emotionally (from the heart). To this end the church in institutional

## **PRACTICAL THEOLOGY**

**form, when unreservedly committed to the authority and reliability and sufficiency of Holy Scriptures, fills an important role in God's purpose for this present age.**

**(To be continued)**