

THE NATURE AND SCOPE OF PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

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After two pastorates Samuel Volbeda, Th.D. (1881-1952), served the Christian Reformed Church with great distinction first as professor of Church History from 1914 to 1926 and thereafter as professor of Practical Theology from 1926 to his retirement in 1951. A full generation of students aspiring to the gospel ministry received instruction from him in such courses as Homiletics, Liturgics, Pastoral Care, Church Polity and Government, and Missiology. With regret we note that of his penetrating insights little has ever appeared in print, largely because of personal reticence.

Occasionally, however, he was invited to address groups other than his seminary students. On one such occasion in August, 1939, he lectured for four hours to a sizeable gathering of alumni at Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, PA. His lecture was taken down in shorthand and then mimeographed for limited distribution. It dealt with a subject dear to his heart, one on which he could speak with much confidence and unrivaled competence and eloquence.

Even after almost fifty years this message has lost none of its relevance. Practical Theology in many a theological curriculum seems to have drifted far from its biblical foundations and often enslaves itself to the latest psychological and/or sociological novelties. Here are words of grace and pastoral wisdom calling those committed to serve Christ's church in official capacity to a richer, fuller and more clearly defined understanding of the work which they are to carry on in the Savior's name. We are pleased to be able to publish the address in three installments.

Defining our terms

I purpose to give an answer to the question, which work and whose it is to which the term "practical" in the designation Practical Theology makes reference. This answer will occupy us the several hours allotted to me upon the present occasion.

Perhaps I may start out by asking, What is Practical Theology? But what is theology in general? *Theology* may be defined as the scientific construction of the body of information which God has through revelation afforded his people in the Holy Scriptures with a view to the redemption of his people, the destruction of the works of Satan, and thereby the promotion of the glory of his name. These biblical materials are generally distributed over four departments called, respectively: Exegetical, Historical, Systematic and Practical Theology.

This differentiation and the nomenclature employed are doubtless defective. The terminological approach is purely formal; it has nothing to say on the subject-matter itself. *Exegetical* suggests a text that is to be interpreted. But what text is to be expounded? Whence is it? Is it authentic? What about the book as such (Biblia) and as a whole? One naturally wishes to know something about the book before he undertakes its exegesis. *Historical* does not answer the question, pertinent though it be: the history of what? Of the book, of the people passing over the pages of the Bible, of the church? *Systematic* applies equally to the other departments of theology. Science is inherently systematic. The name is not distinctive at all. *Practical* raises certain questions. Let us face them as we proceed.

What is Practical Theology? Is it theology that is not theoretical, something to be done rather than known? Is it theology concerned with some practice or other? And if so, whose practice? Is it theology that may be put to some practical use? The name is ambiguous.

Of these several constructions the second is invested with the largest degree of plausibility. But even so, questions multiply. Is the practice studied in this department actual

practice as recorded in history or normative practice as set forth in ethics? You will observe that I have already restricted the term "practice" to the doings of moral agents and so have given it a moral connotation.

To begin with the ethical construction of practice: ethics is the theological science dealing with what God's people ought to be according to God's law and ought to do in fulfillment of God's law, individually and collectively, privately and publicly. However, ethics is traditionally not a discipline of Practical, but of Systematic Theology. Again, ethics is the science of what all men alike should do, ought to do. For all men are duty bound to be and act as God's people. He made them all, and forever remains their rightful sovereign. There is but one will of God for all men; therefore there is but one ethics, namely Christian ethics, not two ethics: one for Christian (Christian ethics), another for non-Christian people (philosophical ethics or howsoever called). There is but one God, one law, one judgment (all men must appear before the judgment seat of Christ). Now that one and only ethics is of course theological. For there is no authentic record of the one will of the only God for all men other than the infallible revelation thereof in God's will. But, as was observed, ethics is not Practical Theology.

Is Practical Theology, then, the science of what was actually done in history, whether done aright or amiss? Done, it should be added, not by God or angels whether good or bad. Earth alone is the scene of history and history has an anthropological as well as a moral connotation. History deals with the deeds performed upon earth in the life that man lives. Is Practical Theology the science performed upon earth in the life that man lives? Is Practical Theology the science of *Acta humana*, if not of *Agenda humana*? It may be remarked that said *Acta* should be measured by the yard-stick of the *Agenda*. For men's actions are ethically conditioned. They are either right or wrong, never neutral. History is not an indifferent, uncritical recital of facts which takes no account of God's absolute sovereignty and man's responsibility. An amoral treatment of man's deeds is virtually immoral. It is undeniably immoral to deny or to ignore the law of God

whether it be done pragmatically (in deed) or critically (in appraisal of what was done). In conclusion, it is not necessary to distinguish between what has been done and what is being done in the present connection of thought. Suffice it to say that Practical Theology is no more history than it is ethics.

Kuyper's definition

Traditionally Practical Theology deals with the divinely ordained task of the institution denominated *church*. In his masterful *Encyclopedia of Sacred Theology* the late Dr. A. Kuyper has styled the fourth department of theology *Diaconological* theology. Diaconia may mean the work of a diakonos, that is, (menial) servant. But Kuyper uses the term in the sense of the formal relation of service which a diakonos sustains to his master, that is, *in casu hoc*, office, ecclesiastical office.

At first blush this seems to be an improvement over Practical Theology. But upon closer inspection it appears that Kuyper has the task of the diakonos in mind after all, rather than the formal status of office. The element of value that Kuyper's term registers is that the task is an *official* one, requiring for its proper performance a call to office, investiture with office, possession of official, that is: judicial authority. In times of pantheistic levelling of all distinctions like those in which we live, it is necessary to emphasize that the work of the church is not everybody's business, but the task specifically of those members of the church who have been designated to and inducted into office, and who are by these tokens the only constituted officers of the ecclesiastical corporation.

Another virtue of Kuyper's term may be signalized. It plainly intimates that the officers of the church, charged with the performance of the work of the church, are not the lords of the church. They are over the church indeed, but "only in the Lord."

If it were not for the fact that only one set of Jesus' ecclesiastical servants are called ministers in our language,

we might substitute *ministerial* for Kuyper's tongue-twister *diaconological*. Surely it is suited none too well, if only because diakonos has already in Scripture become the *nomen technicum* of the officers of the church (called deacons) charged with the care of the poor.

The term Practical has the advantage of denoting the task rather than the formal notion of the authority in pursuance of which it is performed. Nevertheless Practical is not an ideal term. To begin with, Practical has the adversative connotation of being the opposite of theoretical, abstract, mental, scientific. From time to time seminary students (and others too) betray the mistaken notion that this department of theology does not call for the intense mental application which the other departments of theology require. Some like to think of Practical Theology as devotional theology, as a field in which they lie down to ruminate, chew the cud, after they have grazed in the pastures of the other departments.

Again, Practical, as derived etymologically from *krattein*, expresses action, the use of energy being up and doing, rather than the idea of task, commission, assignment. Now a task is the thing to be done rather than the doing of it. Its approach is objective, where the approach in action is subjective. Practical Theology literally is theology dealing with practice in the sense of action, the expenditure of energy. But it is manifestly meant to be the theology that concerns itself with the work, *ergon*, which the Lord has assigned the church and which therefore constitutes its official task.

A manifest weakness of the name Practical Theology is registered in the fact that it does not as much as intimate whose *praxis* or, better still, *ergon*, it is that is to be studied after a scholarly fashion.

The term qualified, viz., theology, faintly suggests that the practice concerned must somehow pertain to those who believe the Scriptures and would serve the God whose Word it is reputed to be. In a word, the practice definitely of *Christian* people. But if it be recalled that Scripture calls upon all men without exception to fear God and to render

him service, the slight hint afforded by the term theology still leaves us in the air.

The nature of Christ's church

As observed above, traditionally the *praxis* or *pragmata* of Practical Theology have always been predicated of the church of Christ. Practical is by that token the science of *ecclesiastical practice*. We are now face to face with the specific question, in what sense the term church (*ekkleisia*) is to be taken in this connection of thought.

Scripture uses the term *ekkleisia* in more than one sense, though it should be added at once that the various senses in which it is employed are not exclusive but overlap. It is not to be overlooked that this notion of *kalein* is the basis of the word for church. It indicates that the group styled *ekkleisia* has come forth and has associative coherence not of its own accord, but in pursuance of the sovereignly gracious call of God, and that as Scripture repeatedly declares, the church has been called not only *away from the world* but also *unto God himself* in the fellowship of Christ through the Holy Spirit. Separation (segregation) and dedication are the two poles between which the church in all its life and work revolves. It has been separated from the world in order that it might be dedicated unto God. It can dedicate itself to God only in the measure in which it remains separated from this present wicked world. God exclaims: "Come ye out from among them and be ye separate" and "Be not unequally yoked with unbelievers" and "Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness."

This ecomistic (not acomistic) ground (it was chosen *out of the world* precisely that it might be the light of the world) is variously designated in Scripture and is there viewed from various angles and represented as sustaining various relationships. "People of God" is a comprehensive and general term. It denotes a group of people vitally related jointly to God and severally to one another, and organized for joint action in service to God. *Ekklesia* emphasizes the manner in which the people of God came into existence. People of God denotes their official status and settled state. The

qualifications usually predicated of the church (visible-invisible, militant-triumphant, organism-institute) are applicable to the people of God *ueberhaupt* equally well. "Children of God" has a somewhat individualistic approach. Its virtue in particular is the biological and genetic note it strikes. "Family of God" combines both the social and the biological aspects of the people of God.

The people of God may be approached from different points of vantage with full scriptural warrant. One explicit caveat must be issued, however. It is this: normally and ideally the constituency is identical in the three aspects contemplated, namely, the *covenantal*, the *ecclesiastical* and the *basileion*, respectively at one and the same time included in God's covenant of grace, incorporated in his church and taken up into his kingdom.

The church rooted in God's covenant

Of these three, the covenantal relation to God is primordial and fundamental to the remaining two relations. The ecclesiastical structure or the *basileion* set-up are both grounded, anchored in the covenant relation which God and his people mutually sustain.

The *covenant* is the relation of God to his people in pursuance of which God through his Spirit for Christ's sake bestows upon those predestined thereto the gift of eternal and spiritual life. The *zoe aionion* is the *sine qua non* of that communion of God and man which is the *nota characteristica* of covenantal life. The fellowship of the covenant is basically community of life (God's people are born of him; he is their Father). God's people are through regeneration partakers of the divine nature, as Peter assures us. The fellowship of love is but the efflorescence of the life of God which his children possess, just as the life of God's people is but the concretization historically of their Father's eternal love for them in Christ.

The covenantal relation of the saints to God is as basic as stated above for two reasons. The first is that the ecclesiastical institution is an empty thing unless a covenant heart flow through its veins, unless it experiences the element of the

covenant Spirit. Apart from covenant vitality church life degenerates into a corrupt and corrupting ecclesiasticism, as the *historie contemporaine* of the American church, for one, plainly shows. I may be permitted to add that American orthodoxy is so very little alive, lamentably, to the cardinally scriptural and Reformed truth of God's gracious covenant. The consequences of the ignorance and neglect of this supremely fundamental doctrine are obtrusively evident in the sadly moribund state of ecclesiastical affairs practically everywhere. It is more than time that all concerned clearly realize that a church without a covenant foundation is a veritable air-castle, not a house built upon a rock. It is not a tree planted in fertile and well-watered soil, but a post set in the ground. It is a soulless body; it is a steamless boiler; it is a dead wire. It may have the name that it lives, but in very deed it is dead.

The second reason (for the fundamental character of the covenant relation) is that the covenantal relation alone is akin to the intra-trinitarian life of God. The three persons of the Godhead are related covenantally, if the term covenant be stripped of such connotations as are distinctly human. In fact, the covenant of the members of the trinity with one another is the origin of their joint covenant with man. And, conversely, man was created in the image of the covenantal God, in order that he might be susceptible of a covenant relation to his Maker. It is manifest that the ecclesiastical set-up--the least essential, by the way, in *religious* respect of the three relations to God under discussion--has no *ank-lung* in the divine being of God. It is a pure construction and is as such wholly ephemeral. But even the *basileion* relation is no reflection of the intra-divine economy. The church has rightly rejected the theory of the ontological subordination of one divine person to another. But subordination is potently of the essence of a kingdom.

The church as organized

I now come to the second or ecclesiastical relation which God's people sustain to him. It should be remarked that the term ecclesiastical is not used for etymological reasons but largely for the sake of expediency. The term has reference,

obviously, to the special organization of God's people, contrived by the apostles in Christ's name after the Savior's ascension. Unless it be otherwise specified everybody thinks of this institution, when speaking or hearing of the church, though in Scripture the term has a wider range of meaning. In fact, if church members had not been told that the church is invisible as well as visible, be it on different scores, and that it is, for a part, triumphant as well as militant, and that it is a cosmic organism as well as an extra-ordinary institution, they might not have divined it. *Apud populum* "the church" is the ecclesiastical organization pure and simple. There is a tendency among God's people, insofar as they appreciate the ecclesiastical organization at all, to externalize the church *rationaly* by thinking of it in terms of external organization alone. Roman Catholicism is a case in point--an acute case indeed. Sometimes Christian people think of the church-building in first order when the church is mentioned.

Be that as it may, the New Testament people of God are organized ecclesiastically. Under the influence of Richard Rothe and others the idea has been propounded that the institutional church was needful indeed in the past and served its purpose measurably, but has by this time outlived its usefulness and should be, and in fact is being, superseded by the modern state. However, time and experience give the lie unequivocally to the ecclesiology underlying that opinion. As the recent history of Russia and Germany proves, the church does not consent to its dissolution in the totalitarian state, but fights it if need be to the death. It opposes this so-called benevolent assimilation, in faith, that is, in obedience to God's Word. Only a church no longer Bible-believing, which is but another way of saying, only an apostate church, can acquiesce in its own extinction as proposed by totalitarianism.

There is good reason to believe that in the tremendous struggle with the state in which the church is involved, the church will be able to say in truth not only *Luctor*, but also *et emergo*. If Christ intended those who believe in him to be ecclesiastically organized as well as spiritually alive and active, it may safely be taken for granted that he included

the ecclesiastical organization in his purview, when he declared that the gates of hell would not prevail against the church which he promised to *build* in one season upon the truth of his incarnate deity as confessed spiritedly by the apostle Peter.

The ecclesiastical institution was not always in existence. In patriarchal times it was existent only potentially, if indeed potentially, in the domestic arrangement of life. Strictly speaking, the family is the institutionalization of the covenant of grace, as is evident from the biological basis which the covenant has in marriage and the family. When institutional religion was confined to the home--and note that religion cannot subsist without institutionalization, owing to the social genus of humanity--it was really only covenantal; the ecclesiastical form of religion had not yet emerged, and the *basileion* form of religion has to this day no form peculiarly its own. It will hardly do, as some Presbyterian writers have proposed, to find inchoate ecclesiastical arrangements in the pre-Mosaic family. The family altar, as it had been styled, is a distinctly covenantal, not a typically ecclesiastical institution, as the place of the *pater familias* in family worship plainly indicated.

In the Mosaic era institutionalized religion comes to *extra domestic* expression. But this time it was the warp of the theocratic texture of which the Mosaic state was the woof. It stood out more boldly than in the days of the patriarchs; in fact, it paralleled the civil state instead of being shut up within its structure. Yet the state founded by Moses was not mundane like the modern state, but theocratic and by that token inherently religious. It was not alongside itself in order to be full-orbed. In a sense the Mosaic state was totalitarian. The formula of the theocracy was not "a free church in a free state." Church and state were not related additively, that is, mechanically. If they were not blended organically, they were, to say the least, delicately intertwined. But even so, the part of the theocracy spoken of above as the church was at best a church only proleptically speaking.

The church in New Testament manifestation

In the New Testament dispensation the theocracy established by Moses at Sinai fell in abeyance, as being only the shadow and prefiguration of the dispensation in which God will be all and in all. This situation made it necessary for the quasi-independent institutionalization of religion contrived at Sinai either to creep back into the domestic shell from which it had emerged under Moses, or to rise to the level of concurrent independence and jurisdiction alongside of the non-theocratic *civitates terranae* of the Christian era. The latter course was ordained by God, pointed out by Christ in his elementary organization of *hoi dodeka* and formally entered upon by degrees by the executors of the ecclesiastical will of Christ.

It would carry us too far afield today to expatiate on the reason inherent in the historical set-up of the post-Mosaic era of the kingdom of God. It may suffice to offer but *two* related suggestions. They are these: first, that the concomitant facts of the universalism of Christianity and its predestinarian selective basis precluded the continuance of the Mosaic theocracy. Instead, they ushered in the era of internationalism coupled with the practically worldly character of the multiple civil states of the world. In such a milieu the true religion imperatively needed more effective institutionalization than it could possibly attain even in relatively ideal family life. The existent civil states and their eventual successors being virtually *les etats athees* would crush the people of God and so undo God's redemptive work in the world, if they enfolded what we now call the church in its Herculean arms.

Second, Christ intended the nations (*ta ethne*, the peoples politically; *am Jhwh*, organized in the civil states) to be missionized by his followers as the *goyim* among the *laos tou theou* dwelling in the midst of *ta ethne* and preserving their character particularly through their ecclesiastical organization as effected apostolically after the ascent of the Lord Jesus Christ. The accomplishment of this world-conquest needed faith, to be sure. But their world-overcoming faith

also required a basis of operation and point of vantage independent of the civil jurisdiction of the state. In the totalitarian state of whatever color or shape, the people of God must inevitably appear in the light of an *imperium in imperio* as soon as they undertake the spiritual conquest of the state to whose civil jurisdiction they are subject by God's decree. But if, contrary to totalitarianism, God's people be jurisdictionally separate and independent in respect of their religious and spiritual world-mission, the church is indeed an *imperium*. For Christ is indeed *Imperator Maximus*. But it will not be an *imperium in imperio civile*. That would be a house divided against itself. But it will be an *imperium spirituale juxta imperium civile*. Boundary problems are even so bound to arise. But fundamentally the ground work has been laid for the practice of Christ's maxim, "Give unto Caesar what is Caesar's and unto God what is God's." To such an *imperium spirituale* paralleling its own domain the *imperium civile* cannot rightly protest. If it quarrels with the church and is bent upon domineering the church, it does this because it stands committed to notions of civil power and purpose that find no warrant in the Word of him who not only sovereignly chartered the church but also delegated to the civil state its own specific authority and holds the state accountable as unto himself no less than the church.

The kingdom life of God's people

The *basileion* aspect of the life of the *laos tou theou* now requires our attention. The God of his people is an absolute sovereign in first order, in view of the fact that their creation by God is the historic rock-bottom upon which all moral and spiritual relations of God to man and of man to God rest. Now creation was an act of God which he was free, indeed, but in no wise bound, to perform. A creature is *quae talis* first of all, basically, God's possession, and that in an absolute sense: God's unconditional and inalienable possession. The creature, every creature, the highest equally with the lowest and all that are intermediate, is *eo ipso*, forensically speaking, a chattel, personal movable property. The creature has no *suo jure* rights. There is no right extraneous to God's sovereign will which he is in justice bound to honor

and maintain with regard to anything his hand has wrought. No proposition is so characteristic of Scripture, of God's own express Word to sinful, disobedient and rebellious man as the declaration that God is man's absolute sovereign and that hence man is absolutely subject to the will of God. By his very creation at the hands of God man is placed under the reign of God's absolute law. No confession is so typically Reformed or Calvinistic, if you will, as the declaration just drawn from the heart of the Bible. And no maxim is so intensely and unalterably repulsive to the natural man as this doctrine of Scripture and Reformed dogma.

God, then, is king of creation. If, as the Reformed churches avow, grace restores the broken original, it cannot but induce truly regenerate and scripturally enlightened men to own and serve God as their potentate.

God's people certainly do not forget that they are saved by grace. But neither do they overlook the fact that grace, far from superseding God's sovereignty, is precisely God's wise and effective means for bringing rebellious men to a cordial recognition of God's absolute claim to unqualified obedience in heart and life. They indeed revel in the love of God. But as they do so, they recall the lesson of Scripture that God loves them with a love of complacency only insofar as they bow unconditionally, unreservedly, unflinchingly to his sovereign will, so that their love for him in reciprocation of his love for them is nothing less than the fulfillment of his love. Reformed Christians are second to none in joyful and grateful acknowledgement of God's fatherhood. However, they insist that a father must in the nature of the case be progenitor before he can love his offspring. And since he is the cause, second cause to be exact, of their filial being, his authority is logically first in order and he loves his children in the pregnant sense of the term as they honor and obey him. It will be remembered that the fifth commandment requires children to honor by obedience their father and mother.

Now the world is God's creation no less than man who lives therein. And this world is akin to man as man is akin to

God. God has accordingly made man his vice-gerent to rule the world to which he is related and which he inhabits as the sphere of his life. God would have all things serve man, in order that man may serve God therewith in turn. As man is not imposed upon the world from without like an alien (such as an angel would be), but arises out of the dust of the world, is its chief denizen and is its glorious epitome, his vice-regal sway over the world cannot, in consequence, be construed as domination mechanically exercised. His reign is, rather, like the operation of organic law governing from within, just as the law of God to which man is himself subject normally is written on the tablet of his heart and rules him organically from within. Man's authority over the world extends to the world in its entirety. All things have been put under his feet. The organic character of the cosmos accounts for this fact of unrestricted sway. If man rules any part at all, he must rule the whole without exception and so reflect the unrestricted dominion of God.

It is necessary to gain a thorough grasp of the biblical principle that the *basileion* relation of God's people to their divine sovereign is exercised specifically in the discharge of their vice-regal duties in God's world. In a word, man truly honors his heavenly king when he conducts himself worthily as an earthly king under God. Man is like the centurion who recognized that he was himself under authority to say to the soldiers under his own authority to come and go as occasion required. Man's *ministerial* task before God's face is precisely to act *magisterially* in God's world in executing God's mandates respecting that world. God's people are *basileion hierateuma*, which is to say: they rule the world only in order that they may lay it in priestly dedication at God's feet, or if you please, upon God's altar. In the man of God there is a covenant of peace between priesthood and kingship.

The first conclusion is that the *basileion* relation to God has a definitely cosmic setting, background and framework. In worship as such man stands more directly. True, the worshipper is himself a member of the cosmic body; however, upon the occasion of worship he emerges from God's

world to enter God's temple. And heeding God's injunction, "Thou shalt not appear before me empty-handed," he brings to God's altar the fruits of his cosmic labors. In worship man turns his face to God and his back upon the world, and appearing in God's house he stands before his face, prostrates himself before God's throne of glory and ceases for the time being to serve his God, in order that he may commune with him in the spirit of holy worship.

But in his *basileion* relation to God man stands in the midst of God's world and seeks to realize, on his part instrumentally, God's purpose with the world. That divine purpose is, in brief, to bring to actualization the potentialities of Theodoxoy implanted in the world by its glorious maker. This process is a progressive one and proceeds *pari passu* with the unfolding of humanity itself through procreation. The process under discussion is cultural in the sense of the German *Kultur*. It is an ongoing process in the sense of cultivating a field with a view to the gathering of a harvest, and not a mechanical process after the fashion of constructing a building. Ideally there is a beautiful coincidence of the *pleroma* of man and of the world and of time. The translation to eternity is harvest-time. Eternity is the unending season of enjoying the ripe and abiding fruits of God's earth in the heavenly home of the divine husbandman.

The second conclusion we draw is a critical one to the effect that the spiritualistically-negative attitude toward God's cosmos, as rooted in meta-physical dualism, and accentuated by a misconstruction of the biblical doctrine of the *sarx* and stimulated by a well-intended but misdirected zeal for holiness, is fundamentally contraband. For this *acosmism* (easily degenerative, as history teaches, into *anti-cosmism*) stands committed to *two* very serious errors. The first is that it logically involves a denial of the divine integrity of the world-maker. The second is that in horrible arrogance it presumes to know better than God who saw fit upon inspection to delight himself in the finite works of his infinite hands. Without sensing it, those embracing *acosmism*, if only after a practical fashion without seeking to rationalize their attitude and corresponding practice, rule

themselves out of God's court. For they are themselves germinally cosmic. But if God should really demean himself by drawing the world within the circle of his divine interest, he certainly would not admit them to his august presence, seeing they too are but dust and ashes, but leave them out in the cold. God would turn them away and the world which they spurn would close its doors against them. Fortunately for them, reality does not correspond to their vagaries.

We have 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 interrelation binding these three relations together.

The triplicity we have discovered should not obscure the unity pervading it. They are, after all, three stands of one cord. All these relations alike bind us to God; we are members at once of his covenant, of his church, and of his commonwealth. And all children of God sustain everyone of these three relations to God normally.

(To be continued)