

The Role of the Church in Civil Society 2016

The Role of the Church in Civil Society June 5 – June 26: 2016 is an election year! We are surrounded by campaign ads, mud-slinging, and talk show opinions. As we witness the decline in the moral fabric of our society, many Christians wonder what role the church is called to play in this saga. Are we called to pursue legislation that upholds the values of our faith or are we to withdraw from the political and civil process in the firm belief that the realms of Church and State are separate? This four-week class is designed to seriously engage these questions and others as we learn together the role of the church in civil society.

The objective of this class is: to develop a biblical understanding of the various roles of the Church and State and sustain a kingdom-focused perspective of civil engagement. Our perspective should be shaped by eschatological revelation, and not disillusioned expectations of social progress.

Introduction: Last week we briefly summarized and defined what is meant by the term, *State*. We did so from a social-historical perspective with the understanding that a State is predominantly defined in modern western society as, "... a community of individuals joined together in mutual consent or social contract to the surrender of certain freedoms for the sake of having God-given rights protected and upheld for the greater good." The "mutual consent" aspect of this definition does not refer to one's willingness to be governed as much as a lack of willingness to revolt (either because revolt is undesirable or because revolution would be futile). We also discussed the Biblical definition of the state, "*The State is part of the created order invested by God with the responsibility of maintaining and upholding the divine moral law of God under which all mankind shall be judged.*" This definition derives from Romans 13:1-4. There were three characteristics of the state we discussed: 1) This biblical definition defines how a state *should* operate, not the manner in which all states *do* operate. For example, it would be preposterous to suggest that all forms of government are God's servant for good to those they govern in light of such regimes as the Third Reich or modern day ISIS. 2) The state is part of God's created order; some suggest its necessity directly linked to the fall of Genesis chapter 3 (see Abraham Kuyper's statement below)¹. 3) Since the state is part of the created order, it is fallen and is itself totally effected by the fall. This is not to say that there is a withdrawal of God's common grace whereby he makes man conscionable to his moral law (or natural law), but man has the ability to resist the common grace of God and pursue a form of government that is completely motivated by the sinful desires of one man or many. With this understanding of the state transmitted to us by both society as well as scripture, we will move on to defining the church.

The Church Defined: In order to better understand the relationship between the Church and civil society (or State), we need to develop a thorough understanding of the definition and nature of the church. We will begin, as we did in the previous lesson with the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF), the confessional standard of our church. We begin here because we believe the confession to be a true summary of the teachings of scripture. The WCF distinguishes between the visible and the invisible church. It states, "*The catholic or universal church, which is the invisible, consists of the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ the Head thereof; and is the spouse, the bod, the fullness of him that fills all in all. The visible church, which is also catholic or universal under the gospel (not confined to one nation, as before under the law), consists of all those*

¹ "For, indeed, without sin there would have been neither magistrate nor state-order; but political life, in its entirety, would have evolved itself after a patriarchal fashion, from the life of the family. Neither bar of justice, nor police, nor army, nor navy, is conceivable in a world without sin..." (Kuyper, Abraham. *Lectures on Calvinism*. Pg. 80)

The Role of the Church in Civil Society 2016

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.”²

This definition is helpful for distinguishing between those who are elect and those who are nominal, but does not give us the full detail of the nature of the Church and the relationship between the Church and the Kingdom of God. According to Edmund Clowney in his masterful dealing with this subject in the book that bears the same name as the topic (*The Church*), he defines the Church as a colony of heaven made up of the people of God (1 Peter 2:9-10), disciples of Christ (John 16:8-13) and fellowship of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). At its most fundamental level, the Church is “...*the people of God, the assembly and body of Christ, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.*”³

Part One: *The Church & The Kingdom of God* – Now, the question remains how does the Church, this assembly of the redeemed, and the Kingdom of God relate to one another? The Kingdom of God, quite simply, is “... *both the fact of God’s rule and the sphere of his rule. It is both his kingly authority and his royal domain.*”⁴ However, when we begin studying the nature of God’s Kingdom in scripture it is always described as an eschatological Kingdom. What is an eschatological Kingdom? This phrase comes from the Greek word, ἔσχατον or *eschaton* and means “end”. In other words, the Kingdom of God is an end-time Kingdom, one that is the telos of all history. The Church, as the people of God, is an organism (a living body) consisting of the redeemed both visibly and invisibly for whom, through the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, the Kingdom of God is proleptically present. Leslie Newbigin is correct to state, “... *the eschatological in Christian experience is the shadow of the eschaton cast backwards over time.*”⁵

In other words, the Church has one head - Christ. With the first advent of Christ, the King has come, and the Kingdom has broken in upon us. This breaking in brought into our midst the *finger* of God, which resulted in the healing of the sick, the raising of the dead, restoration of sight to the blind and hearing to the deaf, in short, a reversal of the effects of the fall. These events announced that the kingdom which it to come has invaded history, but the takeover is not complete. The nature of God’s kingdom is that it is already and not yet at the same time. As Christians, we have been translated out of the kingdom of this world (this current world dominion, which is subject to the depravity of the fall), into the kingdom of Christ (Colossians 1:13). This current age is sandwiched between two kingdoms and the Church has the distinction of living within both. For the Church, the restoration brought about by the coming of the kingdom is cosmic (not solely spiritual), and encompasses all of God’s good creation.

The mission of the church encompasses both this world and the world that is to come. As Newbigin states, “*The earthly ministry of Jesus is not the launching of a movement which will gradually transform the world into the kingdom of God. It is, rather, a showing forth, within the confines of the present age, of the reality which constitutes the age to come – the reality of God’s reign.*”⁶ It is to this reign, and the temporal vs. eternal aspect of the reign that we will next direct our attention.

Part Two: *The Church & Eternity* – There have been two extreme views of the nature of God’s kingdom, both of which influence the perceived role of the Church in civil society among those who adhere to these views or a variation thereof. It can more aptly be stated, that people who endorse the extreme

² Westminster Confession of Faith Chapter 25 section 1 & 2.

³ Clowney, Edmund. *The Church*. Pg. 28

⁴ Newbigin, Leslie. *Signs Amid the Rubble*. Pg. 27

⁵ Newbigin, Leslie. *Signs Amid the Rubble*. Pg. 34

⁶ Newbigin, Leslie. *Signs Amid the Rubble*. Pg. 102.

The Role of the Church in Civil Society 2016

views are less frequent. Most people find themselves somewhere along a spectrum between the two. The impact such dualistic and inconsistent thinking has on the understanding of the role of the Church in society cannot be underestimated, the fruit of which will become increasingly clearer as we progress throughout this course.

The first view is that more commonly held in the past, but not without modern day adherents, which sees the nature of God's kingdom as being fully present in the current age. In other words, the "not yet" aspect of the kingdom is disavowed and the kingdom came in its fullness with the coming of Christ. This view, made popular in the recent past by a theologian named C.H. Dodd, is known as over-realized eschatology because the view that the end or telos of world history is present now, and will continue to manifest itself resulting in gradual progressive improvements in the world until the world is completely restored. Many who hold to this view are considered post-millennial in their theology, i.e. they believe in a soft return of Christ after a figurative millennial period marked by steady gradual societal and personal progress. Such a view of the Kingdom relegates all the fulfilment of the promises of redemption and restoration to the current period in which we live. No tragic judgement awaits the human species in which the consummation of all things lies on the other side.

The second view – and remember that both views are extreme, most people live inconsistently in the middle – is the view that this world is inconsequential to the future kingdom, and simply serves as a training ground, a place of preparation for the next. In this view, the material world is considered inferior to the spiritual, and the redemptive purposes of God are isolated as benefitting the spirit man and nothing more. This view considers the body as a prison, and heaven the eternal abode of the redeemed, to immediately await the souls of the faithful. To all who hold this view, the material world and all its elements (family, government, nature), are secondary or tertiary and simply a distraction.

I think it safe to say that the majority of Christians living in the western world in the 21st Century hold to a variation or combination of these two views. Consequently, the role of the Church in such arenas as politics and culture is either over-realized (think of the social gospel movement of the early and middle part of the 20th Century) or underappreciated. It is much easier to gravitate towards the polar ends than to see a third alternative. All who hold to the first view (or a variation thereof), will see the Church's role in society to be of utmost importance, and to lie at the very heart of the Church's mission. Those who hold to the second view will withdraw from culture and society and find solace in apocalyptic thinking, since escaping this world is their only hope of redemption.

The gospel, on the other hand, presents a different view entirely. The perspective of the gospel is that the Kingdom is here, but is also coming. The same Galilean preacher who proclaimed, "*The kingdom of heaven is at hand*" (a Jewish expression for – comes immediately) also taught his disciples to pray, "*Thy kingdom come....*" (Matt. 10:7; Matt. 6:10). Christ spoke of the kingdom as being present (Mark 1:15; Luke 17:20-21) and as coming (Matt. 26:29). We are told that we are living in the last days (Act 2:17; Micah 4:1) and that the last days are coming (2 Timothy 3:1; James 5:3; 2 Peter 3:3). Bible Christianity, is therefore eschatological Christianity. We live life in light of the end with the realization that the end has broken forth and spilled over with the coming of Christ into our world. Judgment has been passed on reprobate man, and judgment is coming. On the other side of this judgment lies the consummation of all things. This world is not a means to an end (second view), nor is the end or overarching purpose of the world something that only the last human being will ever be able to experience (first view). Instead, the New Age is something that the Christian is already tasting in part (Hebrews 6:5), but will not taste in its

The Role of the Church in Civil Society 2016

fullness until all of society, indeed all of creation tastes it with us. Redemption is not solely individualistic, such a view of redemption is self-centered and isolating. Redemption is social and cosmic.

Part Three: *The Church & History* – To the Christian, history has a purpose. The unraveling of time is not without meaning. God is in control, and the purpose of history will result in his ultimate victory. Christ is the purpose of history for the Christian, and he was, is, and shall be victorious. We have often mentioned the four major milestones of scripture: Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Consummation. All of these milestones are cosmic in nature. Newbigin is again insightful when he states, “*It is neither to an otherworldly heaven, nor to a gradual improvement of earth that the New Testament looks forward, but to a divine act by which all created things are to be renewed (Consummation). The Kingdom of God is to come down out of heaven so that God’s will is done in the whole domain of earth as it is now done in heaven. It is to be a new Jerusalem, a human commonwealth with all its appurtenances newly created according to the divine will.*” What indication has God given that such a cosmic event will happen: the resurrection of Christ! Newbigin again states, “*The domain of heaven has touched that of earth and God’s rule is actually being exercised in the world through Jesus. Those who accept him come within the sphere of operations of the powers of the Kingdom...*”⁷

Ultimately, this means that the Christian lives as a citizen of two countries: heaven, and their respective country of origin. There are times when the loyalty to the former sets the believer at odds with the policies and culture of the latter. In such instances, the believer does not cease to be a citizen of both, but is faced with the reality that God’s kingdom is yet to come in its fullness and power. Between here and there is death, judgement, and resurrection. May God hasten such a day!

Conclusion: This week we have endeavored to define the nature of the Church and the Kingdom. The two are not the same, the first is within the realm of and is the visible manifestation of the second. Next week we will transition away from seeking to define the *State* and the *Church*, and will begin discussing how the two relate with and interact with one another.

⁷ Newbigin, Leslie. *Signs Amid the Rubble*. Pg. 27