

James Bannerman's *The Church of Christ*: A Tract for these Times

By Carl R. Trueman

The question of why we should read, let alone reprint, a book by a nineteenth-century Scottish Presbyterian on church polity is a good one and one which demands an answer. To give a concise answer, I believe Bannerman's book to offer a thorough account of the nature of the church and that the times in which we now live require us all to have a solid grounding in precisely that topic. The church in the West is marginal, or being marginalized, in a manner unprecedented in history since the time of the early Fathers. In such a context, knowing who we are, what we represent, and what tools and powers we possess, is going to be vital if we are to survive.

It is no coincidence that Bannerman produced the lectures which form *The Church of Christ* at a point in time when the relationship between church and state was undergoing transition. Indeed, historically speaking, profound reflections on ecclesiology have often been fuelled by precisely such times. The conciliarism of the late Middle Ages, the ecclesiological writings of the Reformers, and the work of men such as George Gillespie and Samuel Rutherford were all occasioned by the challenges posed by significant realignments of church and state.

The mid-nineteenth century was just such an era. Between 1830 and 1850, numerous churches underwent significant divisions. The Afscheiding of 1834 involved a significant secession from the Dutch national church. The Oxford Movement within the Church of England flourished between 1833 and 1841, before finally collapsing with the defection of its most brilliant mind, John Henry Newman, to Rome in 1845. And in 1843, the Church of Scotland split in the Disruption, with around a third of its ministers leaving to form the Free Church of Scotland. This latter event was part of Bannerman's own personal history, as he himself was one of those who left.

Each of these actions connected to issues relating to church and state. The Afscheiding was precipitated by government attempts to ban a Dutch preacher from

the pulpit. The Oxford Movement was driven in the beginning by concerns over government interference in the church. The Disruption, a debate about who had the right to call pastors (whether congregations or land-owning patrons), was eventually decided by Parliament. The key thing to note in each case is that it was the death of the confessional state in post-Napoleonic Europe which raised the questions that led to the crises.

Thus, Bannerman produced his tome on church polity at a time when the close political relationship between church and state in Europe was undergoing fundamental transformation in the wake of post-Napoleonic social and political developments in Britain: the broadening of the franchise by the Reform Act, Catholic Emancipation, and mass Irish immigration caused by the confluence of the potato famine and the need for workers at the height of the Industrial Revolution. At such a time, when routine and assumed relationships were being dissolved and reconstructed, it was necessary to reflect long and hard on what exactly the church was.

We live in similar times. While there has been no Establishment Principle in America which requires fundamental revision, we have enjoyed many decades where the culture of the white, Anglo-Saxon, heterosexual Protestant church has resonated with the dominant culture of America as a whole. That situation has come to an end. Fundamental and obvious antitheses between the doctrines of Christianity and the values and tastes of the wider American world are now obvious. Further, these latter are being aggressively pressed in the legal and social sphere by those with no sympathy for orthodox Christianity in a way that can be neither ignored nor ameliorated by a policy of live and let live. We thus face an analogous

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situation to that of Bannerman, as church and culture realign in dramatic and traumatic ways, some of which press directly on issues of church and state. It is therefore imperative that we think clearly about the relationship between the church and wider society.

To think clearly about church and society, of course, we must first think clearly about the church. Despite much popular literature to the contrary, a good grasp of sociology is not a prerequisite to good ecclesiology. The church is not a function of the wider culture. It is not something which we define or understand after having first defined our broader context. The New Testament is witness to this. Paul spends very little time engaging in his letters with the Roman Empire. It is of comparatively little interest to him. Most of his energy is devoted to expounding on the Christian faith and that in the context of the church. That is a point well worth remembering and one which underlies Bannerman's work: *The Church of Christ* is an elaborate analysis of the church's divine origin, powers, and structure.

In terms of its origin, Bannerman makes it clear that the church is the creation of God. This is a point so fundamental to ecclesiology that to miss it, or to fail to understand its implications, is utterly fatal for any subsequent reflection upon the church. Paul's teaching, for example in Colossians, draws a clear parallel between the creation of the world and the creation of the church. God is the prior creator and sovereign in both cases. More than that, as Christ has a specific role: he is head of creation and thus head of the church.

The Heidelberg Catechism makes this point in its very structure by including the church not in the third part, on gratitude, but in the second, on grace. In short, the church is not a response to the grace of God; the church is a manifestation and a means of the grace of God.

Two important things flow from this basic point. First, we have great cause for rejoicing because the fate of the church depends not upon us but upon the sovereign grace of God. The Lord's promise in Matthew 16 is one upon which we can completely rely because it is rooted in his character and his action in creation, not in our response. By implication, therefore, we do not need to worry overmuch about the fate of the church.

Second, we do not need to think pragmatically about how the church is to be governed or what the church is to do. For the second point which flows from the fact that the church is God's creation as a means of grace is this: the task of the church, the powers of the church, and the tools of the church are not for us to invent as seems useful or practical; they are determined by the one who creates and rules the church – God himself in

Christ. We are not to ask 'What do we think will work in this situation?' but 'What does God's Word say the church should be doing?'

This is the basic foundation of Bannerman's work. In terms of her being, the church owes its existence to Christ. In terms of her power, the church has power only as granted to her in Christ. In terms of her governance and ministry, the church is thus regulated by the Word of Christ, that is, scripture.

It is impossible to do justice to all of Bannerman's thinking in twenty minutes, so I want to focus on the issue of church power. Foundational to his ecclesiology is his belief that all church power is ministerial. This is the implication of the Bible's teaching that Christ is the head of the church. Power properly belongs only to him. In the earthly, visible church, the power of ministers and elders is limited by Christ's rule as expressed in his Word. They have no power intrinsic to their person. Nor does their office invest them with autonomous power. Instead, their power is limited entirely by the Word of God and, indeed, in practice is itself vulnerable to error and always subject to the Lordship of Christ and the teaching of his Word and thus to correction.

This point is important because it helps us avoid two errors. First, it precludes the kind of despotism that binds consciences. In Bannerman's day, this was what he saw as lying at the heart of the Roman Catholic priesthood. In our day, we might see it more as the kind of thing we would associate with cults. Cults, of course, need not be heterodox or heretical in terms of doctrine, even though they often are. More basic to the cult mentality are the claims to bind the consciences of and exert power over adherents by seeking to control their thoughts and deeds in ways that go beyond anything required in the Word of God. Because the church only has ministerial power, she only has power as far as prescribed in the Word of God.

The other error to avoid is that of the rampant individualism that is perhaps more of a problem in most of our churches. We live at a time when everyone does what is right in their own eyes. Yet, while ministerial power may not be despotic, it is still very real. Bannerman brings out beautifully how the Lord has set forth a model for his church which does place significant responsibility for ruling, albeit ministerially, into the hands of the elders and ministers. There is an authority structure to the church which has divine sanction as the means by which Christ's power can be implemented ministerially on a day-to-day basis. That is why the New Testament points to the honourable nature of eldership and also puts in place extra safeguards to prevent false accusations elders being easily

entertained against elders. The judgment of the elders in cases of doctrine and discipline is significant, even if not in an absolute manner. To defy the elders is potentially to defy Christ. It is thus something that is not to be done lightly or hastily or without searching the scriptures long and hard on whatever the presenting issue happens to be.

Bannerman, of course, was classically trained in theology and is thus adept at using clear distinctions to delineate his thinking. In the matter of church power, he divides into three basic spheres: power with respect to matters of faith and doctrine; power with respect to ordinances; and power with respect to discipline. We might rephrase this and say that the church has power with regard to teaching about Christ, administering baptism and the Lord's Supper, and regulating her membership.

All three spheres are spiritual. Doctrinal power refers to the gospel, the proclamation of the life, death, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ and the calling of sinners to repentance in the light of this. The church is not a political body, a lobby group, a context for social work. She is witness to the in-breaking of the new age in Christ. To support this proclamation, she has spiritual tools beyond preaching: baptism and the Lord's Supper which serve to seal the gospel upon the hearts of church members. And undergirding these she has the responsibility for disciplining the body of Christ in a spiritual manner. Indeed, her only tools are spiritual: for the hardened, unrepentant offender, the most serious sanction which can be imposed is that of excommunication. This involves simply exclusion from the privileges of church membership, particularly the Supper and thus from a means of grace. This, of course, points to the need for the church to have a rich connection between her teaching and the sacraments, for only if the Lord's Supper is considered important will exclusion from it be seen as a serious sanction.

In terms of her power in faith and doctrine, Bannerman has a perspective which is of great moment. Writing as one who had himself on a point of principle left the Established Church for an uncertain future, he declared that church's dogmatic role was twofold: to teach the saints the truth of God's Word; and to protest the teaching, values and behaviour of the world. The church proclaims the kingship of Christ through cross and resurrection. These are moral and intellectual affronts to the world. By proclaiming them in both preaching and confession, the church nurtures her members and stands as witness against the sin and rebellion of the world.

This is a most useful point at this moment in time. There are always those in the church who see the church as the problem. That the church's teaching is offensive to

the world around is seen as an indictment of her testimony, her failure to love those outside and to listen to their concerns. Even in the last few weeks I have read precisely such thoughts expressed by church ministers with regard to current debates about sexuality. Regardless of specific instances where the church has acted inappropriately and caused an offence which is not that of the gospel, we do well to note Bannerman's understanding of doctrinal confession as protest, for it is simply the application of Paul's own teaching with regard to the cross of Christ. Indeed, it is of the essence of the church's testimony to be a protest against the philosophies, values and behaviour of the outside world, whether they be sexual, monetary, or philosophical. As Bannerman's point makes clear, that which is necessary to build up the saints is necessarily that which protests the world. And the tools by which she makes her protest are simple: the public worship of God according to his Word, the very existence of which worship is an act of defiance against the powers of this world.

It is that simple. Which is another reason for commending Bannerman. Much junk is written on the pastoral ministry today. Much junk is written about what the church needs to do to be effective. Such books slay trees and earn conference gigs for the authors but they are too often predicated on the notion that the church, and thus ministering in the church, is a complicated business. It is not. The church has ministerial power with regard to teaching, ordinances and discipline. She is to focus on these things and trust that God will use her as he has promised. It really is that simple. Yes, Bannerman's book may be long; but much of its length is the result of having to cut away the complexities which others have insisted on intruding into the life and thought of the church.

So why should we read Bannerman today? Because he sets forth a clear and extended discussion of exactly what the church is. What is so clear, as we look at the confused response of various contemporary churches to the sexual revolution which has engulfed our society, is that so few churches actually know what they are supposed to be. For too long the happy coincidence of social context and church life has meant that we have not had to reflect on such things and this has made us sloppy and vague in our thinking. Now, as the sudden rift between church and society takes place at a pace we could never have anticipated, we need books which have addressed these issues and which will focus our minds on the important issues and categories about which we need to think. Bannerman, precisely because of his personal experience and his grasp of the biblical teaching on the church, offers us a remarkable place in which to begin such reflection. ■