

The Soul of the Church: The Church's Spiritual Mission

By C. N. Willborn

Today we are experiencing an elevation of pressure upon the church to act outside her God given duties and calling. There has always been a struggle for those who feel oppressed or who are sympathetic to those who are oppressed, to use the church for purposes she was not intended. In the midst of social and political upheaval, the church is tempted to take on roles for which she is neither suited nor called to by God. The mistake is often due to a poor or weak ecclesiology. To put it simply, in the midst of difficult socio-political times, some are prone to forget that the church is not the state and vice versa. Sometimes it is as simple as failing to recognize the proper and biblical distinction between the city of man and city of God, to utilize Augustine's tried and true categories from his fifth century classic, *The City of God*.¹ The problem with such failures, no matter how they are motivated, is that the gospel comes to mean something other than what the church believes it to be from the Bible. It becomes a works-oriented affair of doing good social deeds or producing the "right" political outcome. Of course, those who tend to expand the role of the church institutional to such works, do not see it as corrupting the gospel, but filling it out. All of this is to explain why this article is germane now and in every generation. Augustine's categories need to be remembered and applied if the church is to remain the church and not become an institutional change agent.

As we proceed, it will be helpful to say that Augustine's city of God and city of man distinctions more recently have been altered slightly for Christians and the church. Of course, these changes are intended to help the church and the individual Christian as they pursue their distinct, yet overlapping, lives in this world. The new labels corresponding to Augustine's classic ones are the "common kingdom" and the "redemptive kingdom." The latter, redemptive kingdom, is a reference to the church. Indeed, the redemptive kingdom

is synonymous with the church as the doctrinal standards for Presbyterians state: "The visible church... is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus, the house and family of God" (Westminster Confession of Faith 25.2).² This redemptive kingdom, or church, has "its own special work" and must guard against its corruption by entering into other work, no matter how good or worthwhile or necessary that work may be. When we act outside our God given duties and calling as the church we enter into the work of the common kingdom and distort the redemptive mission of the church.³

What we wish to do in this article is concentrate on the classic doctrine of the spirituality of the church or the nature of the redemptive kingdom on the earth. In so doing we wish to recast that sacred doctrine as "the soul of the church," for it is just that. We shall argue that the soul of the church is that which her King has planted in her heart. Furthermore, we shall argue that the seed planted in the heart of believers is that of worship and discipleship. The church's mission then is to worship as He has commanded and the discipling (which covers

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1. Augustine of Hippo, *The City of God* is available in numerous monograph editions and is included in the *Nicene-Post-Nicene Fathers*, Marcus Dods, trans., Philip Schaff, ed. (1886; repr. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1999).

2. Hereafter WCF.

3. For a popular discussion of the "common kingdom" and "redemptive kingdom" concepts and outworking of the two, see David VanDrunen, *Living in God's Two Kingdoms* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010).

evangelism to church planting) of all the nations as He has commissioned. Lose the mission and you lose the soul. We've all seen people who seem to have lost their mission in life. They seem soulless, wandering aimlessly from one task to another. Often such a person is more destructive than constructive. That is always true when the church loses her mission, she is more destructive than constructive, leading people to negative, critical lifestyles rather than worshipful, discipling lives.

Were we to pose the purpose of this address in a thesis statement, we could do no better than to quote the premier theologian of Scotland, William Cunningham, who wrote: "The church is a supernatural institution, having direct relation exclusively to men's spiritual and eternal interests." Please notice the strong and explicit language of "exclusively." He went on to comment on his proposition by saying, "we can know nothing certainly about [her supernatural mission] except from the supernatural revelation which God has given us in His word."⁴

As we consider the spiritual and eternal interests of mankind for which the church is singularly called, we need to be aware of *modern attempts to revise the mission of the church*. No one played a larger or more influential role on the revisionist stage in the 20th century than Ernest Trice Thompson. Thompson (1894–1985) was an eminent historian and he produced a magisterial treatment of *Presbyterians in the South* in three volumes.⁵

4. William Cunningham, *Discussions on Church Principles* (1863; reprint, Edmonton, AB Canada: Still Waters Revival Books, 1991), 196–97. On the American side of this same position are Charles Hodge and James Henley Thornwell. For a fine examination of this doctrine as set forth in the theology of the Charles Hodge, "the Pride of Princeton," see Alan Strange, *The Doctrine of the Spirituality of the Church in the Ecclesiology of Charles Hodge* (Phillipsburg, PA: P & R, 2017). Said volume is a publication of Dr Strange's dissertation of the same name successfully submitted to the faculty of the University of Wales in 2013. In this volume you will find Dr Strange affirming this author's treatment of both Hodge and Thornwell on this subject (p. 226, note 678 of dissertation). Furthermore, one may find Hodge's agreement with Thornwell in Appendix A, pp. 229–31 and Strange's comment that Thornwell's position on the spirituality doctrine being "This is the classic Reformational position that sees the two as distinct and both under God: a historic Reformed position that is both anti-Eraſtian and anti-Roman" (228).

5. Ernest Trice Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South*, 3 vols. (Richmond, Va.: John Knox Press, 1963, 1973, 1973). Thompson taught at Union from 1922 until 1964. "No man had more influence on the Presbyterian Church in the United States..." *Ernest Rice Thompson: An Appreciation* (Richmond, Va.: Union Theological Seminary in Virginia, 1964), 7.

6. Ernest Trice Thompson, *The Spirituality of the Church* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1961), 25.

7. Walter Lippman quoted by Rupert P. Vance, et al, *Exploring the South* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1949), 8.

Educated at Hampden Sydney College (BA), Columbia University (MA), and Union Seminary Richmond (BDiv), he was honored with an honorary doctorate by Washington and Lee College in 1933. Thompson spearheaded the reunion movement that led to the merger of the United Presbyterian Church in the USA (PCUSA aka Northern Presbyterian Church) and the Presbyterian Church in the US (PCUS aka Southern Presbyterian Church), which took place in 1983. Thompson was 88 years of age when the reunion was finalized. It is hard to overstate the large role he played in the downgrade of Presbyterianism in the 20th century, considered from an ecclesiological and theological perspective. Upon his death at age 90 in New York City, he was buried at Hampden Sydney University in the old Union Seminary cemetery, the same cemetery in which rests the remains of such men as R. L. Dabney.

For the 100th anniversary of the PCUS, Thompson produced a small but influential book entitled *The Spirituality of the Church*. Writing in 1961, Ernest Trice Thompson asserted: "This theory of the spirituality of the church, *born in the slavery* controversies of the antebellum period, was strengthened by the Civil War, and confirmed in the bitter days of reconstruction. It was the theory of B. M. Palmer, J. B. Adger, J. A. [sic] Girardeau, Thomas E. Peck, Robert L. Dabney and others..." (emphasis added).⁶ Thompson later picked up his main objective and that was to "re-form" the doctrine. He quoted Walter Lippman who argued that the South had to change in all its agencies to meet the social shifts.⁷ The church was included as one of those "agencies" and Thompson argued for re-forming the church's approach to social matters and that necessitated a "re-form" of the church's mission. In fact, he said, the mission of the church underlies many of the problems in the church toward race relations, church growth, and union with other church bodies. ("That very statement could be attributed to leading adherents of similar change in our own day, could it not?") Thompson continued to argue that that which is suitable for individual Christians—namely, social, political, and moral rights—ought to be equally taken up by the church institutional. Walter Rauschenbusch, the theologian of the Social Gospel movement of the early 20th century, was Thompson's example for the church in this regard. Thompson explained that the social gospel was born out of Rauschenbusch's coming to grips with reality. The epiphany came to Rauschenbusch in the context of Hell's Kitchen, in New York City, where "the simple gospel of his fathers, following the traditional pattern of church ministrations ... could not save souls as fast

as they were being destroyed.”⁸ Thompson wrote that, mind you, in 1961. Reforming the mission of the church to give her a social and political voice was E. T. Thompson’s heartbeat. It surely stemmed from pure humanitarian motives, but the direction he pointed the church was not a gospel honoring route.

The 21st century has its own brand of revision attempts. Perhaps the most articulate appeared in a 2016 piece from Sean Michael Lucas. In an online publication, Lucas wrote, “I want to attempt the seemingly impossible: to rehabilitate the idea of the ‘spirituality of the church’ in such a way as to make it a vehicle for the church to speak to social and political issues as part of a full-orbed Gospel [sic] mission.”⁹ In fairness, we should distance Lucas from Thompson because of their many differences theologically. Lucas is far more confessionally conservative, whereas Thompson was at best a theological latitudinarian. Still, we are obligated to say in this early part of our address that we think Lucas’ approach toward a rehabilitation of the spiritual doctrine of the church fails on Biblical grounds. Let us remind the reader that Paul did not directly address slavery in his day, even though he had a wonderful opportunity in the case of Onesimus and Philemon. Likewise, Peter did not do so as he instructed slaves and masters in their mutual relations. The apostles, to a man, did not address politics and social reform of societal institutions, but called the church to respect, honor, and pray for civil leaders. There is no republican, democrat, Tory, Labor, or Conservative partisanship offered in the Bible. We’d encourage our readers to see Carl Trueman’s *Republicrat: Confessions of a Liberal Conservative* where “[i]n this highly readable analysis ... Trueman warns against absolutizing any political/economic worldview” (Andrew W. Hofferker).¹⁰ If Paul and Peter did not call the church to condemn the person and politics of Nero, but rather pray for him, then we have good examples to follow in maintaining a high spiritual ground for the church. In fact, we shall see that one of the leading proponents of the spirituality doctrine and defender of the soul of the church, James Thornwell, argued this very case when he said, “The church is exclusively a spiritual organization, and possesses only spiritual power. ... The only voice she utters is the Word of God. ... The salt that is to save this country is the Church of Christ, a Church that does not mix with any political party.”¹¹

With that said, we wish to offer *A Polemic Against Extending the Mission of the Church to the Socio-political*. This is necessary for a number of reasons, but none more so than the claim we read above from E. T. Thompson that the doctrine of the spirituality derived

from the antebellum slave context. That is still a common historiographical mistake which was popularized and given some further academic credentials by Professor Jack Maddex of University of Oregon. This claim, that the American Presbyterian church shifted to a spirituality position in order to be quiet about slavery, is also a convenient one to make for opponents of the historical view of the church’s nature and mission. Once this sort of “historical fallacy” is attached to this or any such doctrine or practice, the damage is done. The doctrine or practice is irrecoverable. We certainly live in an age when any reference to anything and anyone associated with antebellum slave period is written off and torn out of books and dismantled if still standing.

Some of the names most often associated with the spirituality doctrine of the church are J. H. Thornwell, R. J. Breckinridge, and Stuart Robinson. We shall dispense with Breckinridge upfront for he was a strong adherent of the limited mission of the church or spirituality doctrine even though he was a staunch opponent of slavery. He did not see the doctrine as a convenient way to “ignore” or “dodge” the slave question. He simply saw the slave issue as a social issue that was to be addressed in the realm of the city of man/common kingdom by individual citizens of that city/kingdom, citizens of the state of Kentucky in his case. He like Thornwell, Robinson, and others saw themselves clearly in the line of continuity with our Scottish forefathers, not as products of antebellum slave society.¹² Robinson even refers to himself and his fellow American Presbyterians as adherents to “the Scoto-American theory.”¹³ They did not see themselves as taking a doctrine of the church and forging a new course or unique application for it. They did not see the church as a socio-political agency for reshaping culture through institutional transformation.

8. Thompson, 41.

9. Sean Michael Lucas, “Owning Our Past: The Spirituality of the Church in History, Failure, and Hope,” *Reformed Faith & Practice*, vol. 1, no. 1. (2016), <https://journal.rts.edu/article/owning-our-past-the-spirituality-of-the-church-in-history-failure-and-hope/> [accessed January 7, 2020]. Emphasis added.

10. Carl Trueman, *Republicrat: Confessions of a Liberal Conservative* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2010).

11. The substance of the General Assembly Address Thornwell delivered in 1859, from which this citation comes, may be found in B. M. Palmer, *The Life and Letters of James Henley Thornwell* (reprint, Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), 435–37.

12. For a contra continuity argument see Jack Maddex, “From Theocracy to Spirituality: The Southern Presbyterian Reversal on the Church and State,” *Journal of Presbyterian History* (1962–1985), Vol. 54, No. 4 (WINTER 1976): 438–457.

13. See Stuart Robinson, *Discourses of Redemption*, 3rd ed. (Richmond: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1866), p. 474.

As one surveys Thompson's or Maddex's consideration of the spirituality doctrine, however, it is surprising that little attention is paid to influential predecessors of those most often associated with the doctrine. For instance, William Henry Foote and John Holt Rice were paragons of influence in the Southern region but find little place in the discussions of Thompson or Maddex. John Holt Rice (1771–1831), founder of Union Seminary (VA), was opposed to slavery—"I am most fully convinced that slavery is the greatest evil in our country, except whiskey"—yet he held tenaciously to the spirituality doctrine of the church. Writing on the topic of slavery, as he frequently was inclined, he promoted a spirituality doctrine that would find noble defenders in the next generation.

The reason why I am so strenuously opposed to any movement by the church or the ministers of religion on the subject is simply this. I am convinced that any thing we can do will injure religion, and retard the march of public feeling in relation to slavery.... Under this conviction, I wish ministers of religion to be convinced that there is nothing in the New Testament which obliges them to take hold of this subject directly. In fact, I believe that it never has fared well with either church or state, when the church meddled with temporal affairs.¹⁴

Contrary to Thompson and Maddex, it is evident that the spirituality doctrine was neither invented to promote a pro-slavery position amongst antebellum Southern Presbyterians, nor was it of post-bellum origin.

More recently scholarship has substantiated the claim that the spirituality doctrine was neither novel, nor class-oriented, nor post-bellum. In a study of J. H. Thornwell's ecclesiology, John Vance argued that Thornwell's view of the spiritual nature and mission of the church was informed by the handiwork of the Scots Worthy Andrew Melville and the Scottish Second Book of Discipline, which had played an integral role in the forming of the Free Church of Scotland.¹⁵ Thornwell's

explication of the spirituality doctrine surfaces in a number of writings. That the church's nature and duty is singularly spiritual is implied throughout his several addresses on the office of elder (1843–1856),¹⁶ but becomes more apparent to the reader in his debates with Charles Hodge over the divine warrant for "church boards." His most perspicuous expressions of the doctrine occur in connection with the slavery question and is perhaps best illustrated in the following excerpt:

The relation of the Church to Slavery cannot be definitely settled without an adequate apprehension of the nature and office of the Church itself. What, then, is the Church? It is not, as we fear too many are disposed to regard it, a moral institute of universal good.... The Church is a very peculiar society; voluntary in the sense that its members become so, not by constraint, but willingly; but, not in the sense that its doctrines, discipline and order are the creatures of human will, deriving their authority and obligation from the consent of its members. On the contrary, it has a fixed and unalterable Constitution; and that Constitution is the Word of God. It is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ.... The power of the Church, accordingly, is only ministerial and declarative. The Bible, and the Bible alone, is her rule of faith and practice.... Beyond the Bible she can never go, and apart from the Bible she can never speak (Thornwell, 4:382–84).

In following this line of reasoning, Thornwell was in the mainstream of Scottish Presbyterianism, and particularly the mature ecclesiology of the Second Book of Discipline (1578). The power and policy of the church, according to Scottish ecclesiology,

is different and distinct in its own nature from that power and policy which is called the civil power, and appertains to the civil government of the common wealth: Albeit they be both of God, and tend to one end, if they be rightly used, to wit, to advance the glory of God, and to have godly and good subjects.

14. Quote from William Maxwell, *A Memoir of the Rev. John H. Rice* (Philadelphia: J. Whetham, 1835), 306–08.

15. John Lloyd Vance, "The Ecclesiology of James Henley Thornwell: An Old South Presbyterian Theologian" (Ph.D. diss., Drew University, 1990).

16. Thornwell, *The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell*, 4:15–142; 145–295.

17. *Second Book of Discipline* 1.9–11. Text modernized. Compare with Stuart Robinson, *The Church of God as an Essential Element of the Gospel* (Philadelphia: Joseph M. Wilson, 1858), appendix, p. xx, and *The Second Book of Discipline*, ed. James Kirk (The Saint Andrews Press, 1980), pp. 166–167.

10. For this power ecclesiastical flows immediately from God, and the Mediator Jesus Christ, and is spiritual, not having a temporal head on earth, but only Christ, the only spiritual King and Governor of His kirk.

11. Therefore this power and policy of the kirk should lean upon the word immediately, as the only ground thereof and should be taken from the pure fountains of the Scriptures, (the kirk) hearing the voice of Christ the only spiritual King, and being ruled by his laws.¹⁷

Evidently, Thornwell's view of the nature and power of the church was not novel, but consistent with early Scottish ecclesiology at this point.

In the standard, received intellectual study of Stuart Robinson, Preston Graham demonstrated the early influence of William Henry Foote upon Robinson. Foote, writes Graham, documented "the doctrine and practice of the American experiment as rooted and grounded in the Scottish tradition."¹⁸ Thus as a young man Robinson imbibed the "Scoto-American" doctrine of the church in its distinctive relation to the state as it had been offered before him. Because of his early exposure to the spirituality of the church in the Scottish tradition, Robinson's ministerial and academic career was characterized by an emphasis on the declarative and ministerial role of the minister and the church. In 1855, Robinson introduced a new journal, which Thomas Peck described as "devoted to the discussion of ecclesiastical questions mainly and specially to questions mooted in the Presbyterian Church" (Graham, *Kingdom*, 21). Though the new journal—*The Presbyterian Critic and Monthly Review*—lasted only two years, Robinson and his contributors addressed various questions of abiding and crucial importance to the church.¹⁹

Much of the material from *The Presbyterian Critic* found more systematic statement in Robinson's 1858 publication, *The Church of God as an Essential Element of the Gospel*. In *The Church of God* Robinson set forth the doctrine of the church from a Scoto-American perspective, as he dealt with many significant nineteenth century Presbyterian controversies.²⁰ "Robinson," wrote Preston Graham, "followed Thornwell in connecting his understanding of the church with the Scottish heritage" (Graham, *Kingdom*, 29). Robinson confirms his respect for and indebtedness to the Scottish heritage by including both the *First Book of Discipline* and *Second Book of Discipline* of the Church of Scotland in the appendix to *The Church of God*.

When the War Between the States erupted, Robinson once again turned his hand to the printing press to call the Presbyterian Church to refrain from political meddling and maintain the high road of the purely spiritual enterprise of the church. Robinson's new periodical, the *True Presbyterian*, was an alternative to R. J. Breckinridge's *Danville Quarterly Review* and existed to express "the idea that one peculiar and distinctive feature of Presbyterianism as a Church government consists in that separation of the secular and spiritual order."²¹ Like Thornwell in South Carolina, Robinson and his protégés were making every effort to purge the church of parachurch influences, extra-ecclesiastical

offices, ecclesiastical intermeddling in the affairs of state, and theological compromise.

After the formation of the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America (1861) and into the post-bellum period, prominent leaders maintained the same high view of Presbyterian ecclesiology and the spirituality doctrine. John B. Adger, Robert L. Dabney, John L. Girardeau, J. A. Lefevre, and Thomas Peck are noteworthy for their efforts to direct the Southern Church in the Robinsonian/Thornwellian ecclesiological emphases. Adger is particularly significant for his role in revising the church's Book of Discipline, which culminated in 1879. Of more abiding significance are Girardeau's efforts to set forth the nature and duties of the diaconate, which produced numerous journal articles totaling nearly two hundred pages.²² In each of these cases, *jus divinum* Presbyterianism and the spirituality of the church are central issues.

In 1892, Thomas E. Peck, a protégé of Robinson, published his own *Notes on Ecclesiology*. Though it is late in date, it confirms the argument that Thornwell and Robinson drew from the Scottish *Second Book of Discipline*, as well as the erudite Scottish Presbyterian theologian George Gillespie (1613–48). Peck certainly held to the spirituality of the church and believed it to be old, and not a "new point of view." The power of the Church, wrote Peck, "is only 'ministerial and declarative,' that is, the power of a minister or servant to declare and execute the law statute-book of his kingdom, the Scriptures contained in the Old and New Testament."²³ The Church, therefore, is a spiritual institution with a Sovereign Head. Her function and role are dictated by her Head through the statute-book given by that Head.

18. Preston D. Graham, Jr., *A Kingdom Not of This World* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2002), 14. Also, see William Henry Foote, *Sketches of Virginia, Historical and Biographical*, Second Series, Second Edition, Revised (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1856).

19. *The Presbyterian Critic and Monthly Review*, ed. Stuart Robinson and Thomas E. Peck (Baltimore, Md., Printed by Mills and Cox for 1855 and S. S. Mills for 1856).

20. Robinson, *The Church of God*, *Ibid.*

21. Stuart Robinson, *The True Presbyterian* 3 (April 1862). For more reading on ecclesiology see select discourses in Stuart Robinson, *Discourses of Redemption*, Third American Edition (Richmond: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1866).

22. J. L. Girardeau, "The Diaconate," *The Southern Presbyterian Review* (hereafter, *SPR*) 30, no. 1 (January 1879): 1–31; "The Diaconate," *SPR* 31, no. 1 (January 1880): 117–60; "The Importance of the Office of Deacon," *SPR* 32, no. 1 (January 1881): 1–29; "The Diaconate, Part III," *SPR* 32, no. 2 (April 1881): 191–209; "The Diaconate Again," *SPR* 32, no. 4 (October 1881): 628–664; "The Diaconate Again," *SPR* 33, no. 1 (January 1882): 175–208.

23. Thomas E. Peck, *Notes on Ecclesiology* (Richmond: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1892), 107.

Defined spiritually, the Church must confine herself to spiritual activities, and is “not to intermeddle with civil affairs which concern the commonwealth,”²⁴ although individuals of the Church will find themselves intersecting with every sphere of life—social and political.

To understand the spirituality doctrine, one can pick up the writing of most any prominent Presbyterian—antebellum or postbellum—and find it expressed in terms much like those set forth above. The spirituality doctrine deals with the nature of church power and the mission of the church, and it flows naturally from the Scoto-Puritan restatement of biblical, *jus divinum* Presbyterianism. Furthermore, the spirituality of the church is a principle derived directly from the Headship of Christ. “For Christ’s Crown and Covenant” was more than a borrowed motto for American Presbyterians; it was the foundational principle of Presbyterian ecclesiology.

With that swift review of the continuity of the spirituality doctrine with the past and evidence that Thompson, Maddex, and others are wrong as to its origin and utility residing in the antebellum slave context, let’s return to the main purpose of our argument.

Stuart Robinson summarized the views of men in the 19th century as it concerned the institutional church and state. First, there was the “New England school” (this would include the English and Welsh establishmentarian view) which claimed, “the Church as one of the agencies fostered by the state for secular purposes and to develop the Christian state.” Next is the “Gallic school of entire indifference to the whole question of the relation of Church and state.” Finally, there is the *Scoto-American* school, “denying any connection or co-ordinate jurisdiction in spirituals and temporals between the state and the Church.”²⁵ Today, we face an amalgamate of the New England and Gallic schools which finds the entire question unnecessary and so the church is seen as an agent of transformation, actively engaging in social and political rhetoric without regard to the NT distinction between the sword (civil authority) and the Spirit (ecclesial authority).

In this brand of ecclesiology, we find more than one stumbling block in the message of the church. No longer is the stumbling block Christ alone, but the Christ of the Democrat party or the Christ of the Republican

party or the Christ of the socialist party or the Christ of social reconciliation, and on it goes on the political side of the equation. No longer is Christ the stumbling block, but rather how the church administers or addresses social programs for those needing housing, medical attention, and so on. Our actions on matters other than the gospel have led men to reject the message of the church. Furthermore, we have made the decisions of men in far-away times and places, a litmus test for right or wrong when in fact we may not know much at all about the men, their social setting, and their motives. The Word of God seems far safer as the only rule of faith and practice. With the safeguard down, we enter into social or political issues, as the church corporate, which then become part and parcel of the very gospel we are called to preach clearly, distinctly, and singularly. This was never the mind of the church and so Andrew Melville instructed King James I,

Sir, as divers times before I have told you, so now again I must tell you, there are two kings and two kingdoms in Scotland: there in King James, the head of the Commonwealth, another is Christ Jesus, the King of the Church, whose subject James is, and of whose kingdom he is not the king, nor a lord, nor a head, but a member. We will yield to you your place, and give to you all due obedience, but again I say that you are not the head of the Church; you cannot give us that eternal life which we seek for even in this world, and you cannot deprive us of it. Permit us then freely to meet in the name of Christ, and to attend to the interests of that Church of which you are the chief member.²⁶

Notice the all-important last plea: “Permit us ... to attend to the interests of the Church of which you are the chief member.” Apparently, the view of the church at least as understood by men like Melville and Augustine before him in *The City of God*, is that the church corporate is not a socio-political voice, but a gospel voice of reconciling justice between holy God and unholy sinful men and must be clearly distinguished from that of the civil or common realm.

Finally, let us consider a *modest review of the spirituality of the church briefly accentuated*. So, if the spirituality doctrine does not include the institutional church reshaping society proactively, directing political drifts, and legislating moral lives of people, then what does it mean? What is the soul of the church? Well, to put it briefly, the seed planted in the soul of the church is “*ministerial and declarative*.” This concept is that which was dredged up from the distant past by our reforming

24. Westminster Confession of Faith 31.4 is cited here to show that the spirituality doctrine has roots also in the Westminsterian branch of Calvinism.

25. *Ibid.*, 475.

26. W.M. Hetherington, *History of the Church of Scotland* (New York: Robert Carter, 1844), 105.

fathers who, prompted by the humanist dictum of *ad fontes*, had returned to the Scriptures and paid close attention to the clear teaching of Scripture from the OT to the NT. Namely, they noted the particular care with which *God instructed His church on how and what to do*. That specificity is encapsulated in the words of our Savior to the church as he parted—"teaching them to observe all that I commanded you" (Matt 28:20).

John L. Girardeau provides us a good summary in his General Assembly Address of 1875:

The church is grounded in the supernatural facts and relations of redemption, and is intended to 'realize the idea of grace.' Her very existence is created by the redeeming mission of Christ. She is not, therefore, a society of human beings, as such, but of human beings as redeemed. As strictly a redemptive institute she must be supernatural. Her origin is supernatural, as lying in the mediatorial work of Christ; her existence as historically developed is supernatural, as springing from the call of the Holy Spirit; her members are men presumed at least to be supernaturally regenerated; and her end is supernatural, as designed to illustrate the grace of a redeeming God.²⁷

This supernatural organization is one with a distinct purpose. In Acts 6, when we have the rudimentary shape of the NT office of deacon set forth, we learn also something about the other office of the church—the teaching office. The apostles were to devote themselves to the ministry of Word and prayer, and that alone. That ministerial and declarative role then came to the ordinary office of elder as the apostolic office became obsolete. The eldership is to proclaim the supernatural message of God and pray for the supernatural work of God to attend the proclamation.

In Matthew 28:16–20 we learn from Christ of this discretionary power or the soul of the church. First, we learn of the primacy of preaching the gospel indiscriminately to all men with the goal of making disciples, Christ's believers and followers. The church has always been concerned to keep the pulpit unencumbered from worldly matters, i.e., politics—"Put your sword back into its place; for all those who take up the sword shall perish by the sword" (Matt 26:52). Who is to wield the sword? The civil magistrate. What was Peter to wield? The Word in humble reliance upon the Holy Spirit. To whom was the sword given then, if not to the church? Caesar, perhaps? Our Lord told us to give to Caesar what is his and to God what is His (Matt 22:21). He clearly distanced the sword of the civil office from the Word

and Spirit of the ecclesial realm. Another example of this came from Paul when he said, "it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of wrath, but also for conscience' sake."⁶For because of this you also pay taxes, for rulers are servants of God, devoting themselves to this very thing.⁷Render to all what is due them: tax to whom tax is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor" (Rom 13:5–7).

Jesus clearly stated that His kingdom, the church, is not of this world. In response to Pilate, our Lord and Savior said:

My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting so that I would not be handed over to the Jews [note the social and moral injustice of Jesus's situation, but it is not the work of His servants]; but as it is, My kingdom is not of this realm.³⁷Therefore Pilate said to Him, "So You are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say *correctly* that I am a king. For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world, to testify to the truth" (John 18:36, 37).

Please do not miss this! Jesus said His kingdom is one of testifying—"to testify to the truth." He did not say, "My kingdom and my work is one of social renovation." Rather, our Savior distinctly said the redemptive kingdom's work is that of gospel proclamation! Indeed, one of the first things we read concerning His work on this earth is found in Mark where Jesus "came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God" (Mark 1:14). In the midst of His healing Peter's mother and others we read this: "He said to them, 'Let us go somewhere else to the towns nearby, so that I may preach there also; *for that is what I came for*'" (1:38; emphasis added).

Preaching the gospel is with the intent of bringing people to saving faith in Christ and spiritual nurture in the household of faith, the church. Bringing people into His church, which is not the state, through preaching and baptism, not civil courts, public institutions or social venues, is our soul, our mission, our life. How often today do we hear the argument made that people stay away from church because of the church's former silence on this or that. Or the church's former stance on this or that. The lost person's only hope is not our past sins, but the present power of preaching Christ and Him crucified. When Christ is preached faithfully and winsomely, the excuses of the sinner will fall away. All who are appointed to eternal life will believe (Acts

27. John L. Girardeau, "The Discretionary Power of the Church," in George A. Blackburn, ed., *Sermons by John L. Girardeau* (Columbia, SC: The State Company, 1907), 374.

13:48)! Do we believe that? We will not draw people to Christ by renovating ourselves, but by preaching Christ who renovates sinners.

After the primacy of the preaching for the Church, notice in Matthew 28, the ever so close tie between making disciples and baptism. This, by the way, is one of the reasons we believe in covenant baptism of our infant covenant children—discipleship begins with baptism. The link here is clear. So, the church is to preach and administer the initiatory sacrament in order to bring people into His church. This is the beginning of an ongoing life of disciple-making.

We preach, we baptize, and we further disciple those to whom we take the gospel for their growth in the faith. That is implicit in the “make disciples,” but explicit in “teaching them to observe all that I commanded you.” We do this so that disciples will grow in grace and live holy lives as saints and citizens. It is important to notice I said “saints” and “citizens.” The church does preach the Word to make good, growing saints in worship and witness in and from the church; but I also said that through our exposition of God’s Word we make good, growing citizens *for out there*, in the civil realm, in the public square. The spirituality doctrine recognizes that Christians live in two kingdoms on this side of glory. We are citizens of heaven/city of God/the redemptive kingdom *and* citizens of earth/city of man/the common kingdom. In our role as citizens of the latter, we live out our principled positions concerning social and political matters. As the church we prepare men and women for the new heavens and new earth as the bride of Christ. As the church we send individuals out to speak the truth in love, yes, but to live as leaven in the earthly realm. Please do not collapse or confuse the two anymore than you confuse the divine and human natures of our Savior.

This last point is important for we learn in the church what God commands us to do and not to do. The commands cover our role both within the church and outside the church. We learn how to live as a citizen of the church, the city of God *and* how we are to live as a citizen in the city of man. In another place we have written extensively on our role as the church corporate as we live and serve the brotherhood, the church. That corporate role can also involve the church in the community in meeting mercy needs in the “neighborhood.” Our mercy actions among our people out in the

neighborhood would involve “doing good to all people” (Gal 6:10) with the aim of opening the door for the proclamation of the gospel.²⁸ Finally, in that same article, we expound upon the individual role in the neighborhood as individual philanthropists and humanitarians, applying the teachings of the Bible to everyday life in the public sector.

So, the church does have a role institutionally through her diaconate to address the mercy needs of the neighborhood through the brotherhood, with the end to bring the gospel to bear in lives of the poor and needy and add them to the redemptive kingdom. At the same time, individual Christians have a role to live as exemplary citizens engaged in all realms of the civil sphere—social, political, education, environment, and so on. In keeping these distinctions between corporate church and individual Christian-life we protect the soul of the church.

Stuart Robinson provides a good summary to what has just been said:

The idea of a blending of the two powers, secular and spiritual is purely a Paganism in its origin. Only in the Jewish nation, of all the nations of antiquity, is to be found any exception to the general practice.

In all the inspired expositions of the mission of Jesus Christ, whether in the Old or the New Testament, two ideas are fundamental. The first, that his design is not merely to teach a doctrine and make an atonement, but also to found a community and establish a *government*. The other idea is that the power of administration in this government, of which he is King, is something distinct from that of civil power under which human society is organized for protection of life, liberty, and property of man. That there are duties to Caesar altogether distinct from the duties due to [Jesus] as spiritual King. That ‘His kingdom is not of this world.’²⁹

We live in two kingdoms. Our spiritual citizenship is unique *and* distinct from that of our civil citizenship. The church owns one set of vows while Caesar owns another. Those vows do not overlap. They are distinct spheres of allegiance and duties—they are two kingdoms. To confuse or compound the two is to add to and take away from the pure gospel.

CONCLUSION

You see, the spirituality of the church does not preclude individual Christians from entering into political and

28. C. N. Willborn, “The Gospel Work of the Diaconate: A Ministry Proportioned in Number,” in *The Confessional Presbyterian*, vol. 11 (2014): 13–23.

29. Robinson, *Discourses of Redemption*, 3rd ed. (1866), 477.

social debate and even “activism.” The spirituality of the church does preclude the church in all its corporate/institutional expressions from entering into political and social debate and “activism.” “Unto this catholic visible church Christ has given the ministry, oracles, and ordinances of God, for the gathering and perfecting of the saints, in this life, to the end of the world: and does, by his own presence and Spirit, according to his promise, make them effectual thereunto” (WCF 25.3). Once placed in this institutional body, the church of the living God, we are called upon to exercise our duties within that body and those duties are established—“saints by profession are bound to maintain an holy fellowship and communion in the worship of God, and in performing such other spiritual services as tend to their mutual edification; as also in relieving each other in outward things, according to their several abilities and necessities. Which communion, as God offers opportunity, is to be extended unto all those who, in everyplace, call upon the name of the Lord Jesus” (WCF 26.2). This is the soul of the church.

The position denied and that which is affirmed in what has been said is in full agreement with our Confession of Faith and, therefore, we believe, the Bible. May we, in humble reliance upon the grace of the Holy Spirit, support the worship and work of the church *as the church* to the best of our ability. Equally may we as individual believers in the public sector do good unto all men, both politically, socially, and environmentally. Amen.

SUGGESTED READING

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Webb, Robert A. “The Modern Mind and Christian Service,” in *Elements of Truth*, vol. 2. Jackson, MS: Tucker Printing House, 1915. “The Modern Mind” was a series of addresses delivered at Belhaven College for the Synod’s [Mississippi] Training School between June 22–July 2, 1915 and published by the Committee of Synod. While this is an obscure item, it provides perhaps the single best statement of the church’s soul and pits the spirituality doctrine against other approaches. Because of this, the editors determined to run Webb’s article subsequent to this present one in this issue of *The Confessional Presbyterian*.

Willborn, C.N. “The Gospel Work of the Diaconate: A Ministry Proportioned in Number,” in *The Confessional Presbyterian*, vol. 11 (2014): 13–23. This article deals with the role of the church in meeting temporal needs through the diaconate, while acting clearly within the doctrine of the church and protecting her soul from corruption through extra-ecclesiastical socio-political intermeddling. ■