

Dave Scholes

How The World Works

Prayer of Illumination

Heavenly Father, may you grant us to comprehend your holy Word according to your divine will, that we may learn from it to put all our confidence in you alone, and withdraw it from all other creatures; moreover, that also our old man with all his lusts may be crucified more and more each day, and that we may offer ourselves to you as a living sacrifice, to the glory of your holy name and to the edification of our neighbor, through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Zacharias Ursinus)

Text

Matthew 16:13–20 ESV

¹³ Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” ¹⁴ And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” ¹⁵ He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” ¹⁶ Simon Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” ¹⁷ And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not

revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. ¹⁸ And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. ¹⁹ I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” ²⁰ Then he strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ.

Matthew 18:15–20 ESV

¹⁵ “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. ¹⁶ But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. ¹⁷ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. ¹⁸ Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. ¹⁹ Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. ²⁰ For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.”

Introduction

This is the third and final sermon in our series, *How The World Works*. We’ve been looking at the God-ordained structure of authority in the world. God has created

human beings to live in families — households — and has given those households the task of being fruitful and multiplying, and has given them the responsibility of being the ministry of work, welfare, and education. That is the first sphere of government. Those households, when they get together start to form communities. Those communities take on a shape — which is always downstream from the *worship* of that community — and the *polis* is formed. The city is formed, and therefore, politics is formed: the structure of people living and working together in the same place and time. This, too is a sphere of government which has been ordained by God, and we saw last time that the State has been given the responsibility by God to be the ministry of justice.

We've seen that the State in particular has become bloated and outsized. It has breached its God-given limits, taking from the family much of family responsibility, as families have also abdicated their responsibilities to provide their members with everything necessary for body and soul. We have also seen that the State has largely abdicated its responsibility to actually administer justice and to promote and protect true religion.

Today, we come to the sphere of government that is the Church. The Church, too, has been guilty of both stepping *outside* its God-given responsibilities and of abdicating other God-given responsibilities. The Church has too often stepped into the world of the family and has unintentionally undermined family worship, family

discipleship, and family religion in general. By segregating the church into age groups, and by putting on programmes for those age groups, and by professionalising the task of discipleship — “the youth pastor knows best how to disciple your 15 year old, give him to us” — the Church in many ways has hindered the maturity of Christian households. This is not *just* the Church’s fault. It’s the fault of the households themselves who have, too, abdicated their responsibilities.

But God has made a world that runs a certain way. He has given us families, civil governments, and churches, to carry certain responsibilities, perform certain roles, and protect certain essential elements of our lives and freedom as human beings. When we start working against the way God has ordained things to work, our freedoms diminish, our blessing is limited, and the tasks that have been entrusted to these governments are left undone. This is why we are talking about this in the first place. Christ is Lord, and we want to live according to that reality. To submit to Christ, to obey Him, is to live a free life, is to be a recipient of His blessing and protection.

So today we’re going to look at the Church. What is it? What is it here to *do*? What responsibilities rightly belong to the Church and how should they be carried out? And how, in all this, does the Church work together with the other governments of family and state? Let’s start with *what is the Church*.

What Is The Church?

The Westminster Confession of Faith: Edinburgh Edition Chapter XXV. Of the Church

II. 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 throughout the world that profess the true religion, together with 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.

The Confession says that “The visible church... is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ.” Geerhardus Vos said that “The church is a form which the kingdom assumes... So far as membership is concerned... it is impossible to be in the one without being in the other.”

So, according to the Confession, the Church on the earth is the sum total of all believers — and their children. And apart from the Church “there is no ordinary possibility of salvation.” The Church is God’s agent of salvation in the world. God is saving the world through His Church. And that is where we need to move next, to talk about what the Church is *for*. What is the Church here to *do*?

What Is The Church *For*?

What is the Church given to do? The family is the ministry of work, welfare, and education. The state is the ministry of justice. What is given to the church? In short, the ministry of Word and sacrament.

Jesus Christ, as the only Head of the Church has authorised the Church to preach the Word, to administer the sacraments, and to guard the church's purity through discipline.

The Ministry of The Word

The Word of God is supreme, and it is what the world needs. The world needs the Church to stay in its lane and give people the Word of God. Not the latest spiritual idea; not the latest self-help guide; not the latest spiritual personality profile. The Church must give people the Word, the whole Word, and nothing but the Word.

Paul urges Timothy in 2 Timothy 4:2 *“2 preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.”* Why is this important? He goes on in 2 Timothy 4:3–4 *“3 For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, 4 and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.”*

We live in a different time to Paul and Timothy, but the temptations before the people of God remain the same:

temptation to believe that the Bible is not authoritative, or inerrant, or sufficient. The leading article of *The Spectator* this last week put out a challenge to the Church:

“As a new Archbishop of Canterbury takes her place in St Augustine’s Chair, and as a new Pope prepares to address the city and the world from Rome this Christmas Day, perhaps they should consider how to make their message not more relevant to this world but more radical in transcending it. Instead of worrying about ‘Christian nationalism’ they should seek to win the nation for Christ... The Church commands we listen because it tells the good news of the Gospels, it bears witness to the birth of Jesus, his transforming, miraculous mission and the saving sacrifice and resurrection of Christ crucified.”

The Church exists to bring the Word to the world. When Paul was saying farewell to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20, he assessed his own ministry to them as successful because he had shared with them the *“whole counsel of God.”*

The Word of God is what the Church needs in order for the Church to truly love. In Romans 13:10 Paul says, *“10 Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.”* What law? The law found in the Bible. So for the person who says, the Church should just be about love, you should remind them that loving someone truly means to obey the law towards them. And if you don’t know the law, if you don’t know the Word, how can you

obey it?

Furthermore, in the Great Commission itself, the clear mandate given to the Church by Christ, we can see that it includes the preaching of the Word:

Matthew 28:19–20, “*19 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 **teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you**. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.*”

The Ministry of The Sacraments

So the Church is given the ministry of the Word. It is also given the ministry of the Sacraments. There are two sacraments: baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

Baptism is the initiation rite of the Church. Baptism objectively brings someone into the visible church. It signifies union with Christ, cleansing, and new life. It has replaced circumcision as the covenant sign of the people of God, and is *the* sign that God gives His people to say that He has claimed them for Himself.

The Lord’s Supper is the communing rite of the Church. Once you’ve been brought into the household of God, you get to eat at that household’s table. And you have to eat regularly. The Lord’s Supper signifies your union with Christ and His body, the Church. It is a meal that feeds not just our physical bodies, but our spiritual man. It feeds

and nourishes faith.

Calvin called the Lord's Supper a 'visible Word', that is, a visible representation of the gospel: bread broken, wine poured; body broken, shed blood. In the Supper we are truly and spiritually feeding on the Bread of Heaven, Christ Himself, given for us.

Word and Sacrament. Ordinary means by which God gives Himself to us. Word, water, bread, and wine. So normal. Yet so effective, because God has ordained them to be such. This is what the Church must give the people: Word and Sacrament.

Discipline

The Church also acts according to its God-given authority by enacting discipline to its members. Here again is the Westminster Confession of Faith:

The Westminster Confession of Faith: Edinburgh Edition Chapter XXX. Of Church Censures

THE Lord Jesus, as king and head of his church, hath therein appointed a government in the hand of church-officers, distinct from the civil magistrate.

II. To these officers the keys of the kingdom of heaven are committed, by virtue whereof they have power respectively to retain and remit sins, to shut that kingdom against the impenitent, both by the word and censures; and to open it unto penitent sinners, by the ministry of the gospel, and by absolution from censures, as occasion shall require.

III. Church censures are necessary for the reclaiming and gaining of offending brethren; for deterring of others from the like offences; for purging out of that leaven which might infect the whole lump; for vindicating the honour of Christ, and the holy profession of the gospel; and for preventing the wrath of God, which might justly fall upon the church, if they should suffer his covenant, and the seals thereof, to be profaned by notorious and obstinate offenders.

IV. For the better attaining of these ends, the officers of the church are to proceed by admonition, suspension from the sacrament of the Lord's Supper for a season, and by excommunication from the church, according to the nature of the crime, and demerit of the person.

Let me make a few brief observations.

The church's government is distinct from the civil magistrate. The Church is not there to punish *crimes*, but to discipline its members for *sins*. This is one of the modern church's great abdications: a refusal to administer any church discipline. The reformers saw the application of church discipline, along with the right preaching of the Word and the right administration of the sacraments, as marks of the true church.

Whereas the Word of God preached is opening the kingdom of God unto penitent sinners, discipline is warning and eventually even shutting people out through barring people from the Lord's Supper. That is what excommunication is: barring people from communion

with the body of Christ. Christians who consistently, and unrepentantly, live in such a way that is inconsistent with their profession of faith are to be brought under the discipline of the church.

Discipline is essential, because discipline is a mark of belonging to the family. Hebrews 12:5–11, *“5 And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? ‘My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. 6 For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.’ 7 It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? 8 If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. 9 Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? 10 For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. 11 For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.”*

Over and over again, the testimony of Scripture is that withholding discipline shows hatred for those under your care. A parent refusing to discipline a child is to hate that child and to be perfectly fine with them growing up in a way that does not accord with the truth. A pastor refusing to discipline a church member likewise shows contempt.

He is saying, ‘your sin isn’t really all that bad.’ He is saying, ‘I’d rather not offend you than tell you the truth.’ He is saying, ‘I think I know better than God just what it is this church needs.’ This is one reason why the application of church discipline is a mark of the true church: it shows pastors are willing to do that which is hard in order to be faithful. It shows that pastors are more willing to protect the purity of the church than to build their own thing.

In Matthew 18, the text we read at the beginning, we can see the process of church discipline. Confronting someone one to one, taking witnesses, bringing the issue to the church, and then ultimately, treating them as a non-Christian, which means barring them from the Christian meal. But note that the criteria for discipline is *sin*. If your brother ‘sins’ against you.

There is so much more that could and needs to be said about this, but this is just an introduction. The idea again is that the Church has been given the ministry of Word and Sacrament, has been given the office of the ‘keys’ according to Matthew 16, and those keys involved binding and loosing (Matthew 16 and 18). As the Confession said, this means that the Church has the authority — under Christ — to open (to loose) the Kingdom of God to the repentant; and to close the door (to bind) the Kingdom to the unrepentant.

Herman Bavinck summarises, “The keys of the kingdom... are not general Christian gifts but specific ecclesiastical

authority entrusted to the office-bearers.” (RD 4:316)

Wilhelmus à Brakel says that “The exercise of the keys is necessary for the preservation of the purity of doctrine, sacrament, and life.” (*Christian’s Reasonable Service*, Vol. 2, pp. 19–35)

The church alone holds this key-bearing authority. Families and States do not dictate who gets or doesn’t get to come to the Lord’s Supper; or who can be baptised. And church discipline cannot be rescinded by the State.

How The Spheres Work Together

So the family is the ministry of work, welfare, and education; the state is the ministry of justice; and the church is the ministry of Word and Sacrament. How do the spheres work together?

Church and Family

Firstly, let’s look at the Church and the Family. Families are to bring up children in the faith (Deut. 6:4–9; Eph. 6:1–4), and it is the church’s role to help parents in that duty. The church is able to speak to children without going through parents, as Paul does in Ephesians 6:4, but the instruction to the children is to *obey parents*. It’s not like the elders are to teach children something that their

parents are unaware of.

Parents are to bring their children to the church for baptism, as it is the elders' appointed task to baptise. It is the elders who have been given authority to open the kingdom up to children in that sense. Parents are likewise to prepare their children to participate in the Lord's Supper. They are to train their children *from day one* to join in with the worship of the church. They are to train their children patience and submission to instruction, such that a child can follow instructions in the worship service that culminates in the Lord's Supper. They are to remind their children what this means when we come to the Lord's Supper. But it is not the parents who ultimately admit children to the Lord's Supper; that decision is given to the Church.

But note the relationship. The family is equipped by the church, the family does the work of discipling children, the children are brought into the church, and the church is strengthened.

How can you practically be a church-friendly family? Ultimately, by understanding and submitting to the church's authority as a family. You should prioritise Lord's Day worship *as a family*. Parents should demonstrate submission to the elders of the church in front of their children. Parents should train their children to be joyfully obedient participants in worship. And families should seek to serve the body of Christ together in practical ways.

Having people over for dinner; meeting practical needs in the church; praying for fellow members as a family; and so on.

Church and State

What about the church and the state? How should they work together? First, it's important to recognise that the State wields the sword; it has a *coercive* power. It has the authority to *force* people to stop doing evil. The Church wields the *keys*, which are a spiritual tool. The church's authority is spiritual, not coercive. The church can bar people from the Lord's Supper, but cannot force people to repent, and cannot force people to become Christians.

But this does not mean that the Church has nothing to *say* regarding the State. The Church is to speak God's Word prophetically to kings and those in authority, calling them to repentance and obedience, just as Nathan did to David and John did to Herod. The Word of God never stands neutral; it judges all human relations and institutions.

The church is not to be silent in public; nor should it ever attempt to seize civil power. It is to work through the preaching of the Word, the administration of the sacraments, and church discipline. Spiritual authority, not a coercive authority.

Conclusion

The Church is the government established by God to be the ministry of Word and Sacrament. Ministry, remember, means service. The Church is to serve the people by giving them the Word and the Sacraments, as ordained in God's Word. The Church is to do this under the authority of men who are qualified for the task according to the Scriptures, and the Church is to do this because this is the way God has made the world to work.

We must not allow ourselves to think we know better than God. The Church is not to swell beyond its God-given role and responsibility and authority. The Church must clearly help families be godly families, taking up their responsibilities for the tasks God has given to husband, wife, parents, and children. The Church must be a prophetic voice to the wider culture, to Kings and civil leaders, calling them to submission to the King of all Kings. The Church must fulfil the Great Commission: making disciples of all nations, baptising them, and teaching them obedience to God's Word which remains forever.

This brings, I think, a remarkable simplicity to the task. It brings great clarity to our priorities. Open the Bible, do what it says, trust God with the results. And wherever an area of life in which we are involved: be it family, or work, or in politics, doesn't line up with the truth according to Scripture, we are to be faithful stewards, doing what we can to bring it under submission to Christ's ultimate

authority.