

**Cornerstone United Reformed Church of Edmonton (Alberta, Canada)**

**Dr. Alan D. Strange, The Spirituality of the Church and Current Counter-Responses**

**Friday and Saturday, 7-8 February 2025**

**Friday evening: Christ is the heavenly king of a heavenly kingdom (John 18:36)**

- I. The nature of Christ's kingship
  - A. Seen even in his humiliation
    - 1. He entered that estate in the Virgin's womb.
    - 2. He performed great miracles even in that estate.
    - 3. His kingship was obscured in that estate.
  - B. Its obscurity pertains to the nature of his kingship, which is spiritual.
    - 1. This spiritual kingship baffles Pilate.
    - 2. Jesus is clearly, as a heavenly king, a king of a different sort.
- II. The nature of Christ's kingdom
  - A. It is a kingdom befitting its king—it is not of this world.
    - 1. It is in the world, indeed.
    - 2. Wherever Christians go, so goes this kingdom.
  - B. The kingdom is not exhausted *by* but manifests itself especially *in* the visible church.
    - 1. The power of the church is ministerial and declarative, moral and suasive, not magisterial and legislative, legal and coercive.
    - 2. Here, you have a proper doctrine of the spirituality of the church.

**Saturday morning: The Spirituality of the Church and its Counters**

- I. What is the Spirituality of the Church (SOTC)?
  - A. Distinguished from Christian spirituality.
    - 1. The lived Christian experience is normally associated with the means of grace.
    - 2. The Holy Spirit empowers the Word, sacraments, and prayer.
  - B. The historical development of the doctrine
    - 1. The doctrine of the work of the Holy Spirit was underdeveloped until the Reformation and the work of Calvin.
      - a. Review of the development of the doctrines of Christ and the Spirit in the ancient and medieval church.
      - b. The doctrine of the work of the Spirit was overleapt in the Middle Ages in favor of the development of the doctrine of the Church.
    - 2. It is Calvin and Calvinists who developed the doctrine of the work of the Holy Spirit and, concomitant with that, the doctrine of the SOTC.
      - a. Calvin's doctrine of the work of the Spirit. The doctrine of the Church comes appropriately to follow the doctrine of the Holy Spirit in the loci of the theological encyclopedia in the work of Calvin and the Reformed.

- b. This develops in polity into the doctrine of the spiritual independence of the church in the SBD (1578) in Scotland as an anti-Erastian doctrine, with neither the church over the state nor the state over the church.
    - c. In America, this was picked up in the 19<sup>th</sup> c. as the SOTC and invoked in various debates in the PCUSA, including the slavery debate.
    - d. Hodge comes to better use it with respect to the Gardiner Spring Resolution (1861) and all that developed thereafter in the PCUSA.
  - C. The Holy Spirit gathers and perfects the church by these means.
    - 1. Thus, the church is a spiritual institution rather than a biological one (as is the family) or a civil one (as is the state).
    - 2. This determines the nature of the church's power: it's ministerial and declarative (over against the RCC's magisterial and legislative power) and moral and suasive (over against the state's legal and coercive power).
  - D. The SOTC means that the church is a spiritual agent in the world to preach the gospel to the nations and to be the prime embodiment of the kingdom until Christ returns.
    - 1. Having all sorts of political, social, and economic consequences develop and emerge as part of her spiritual mission.
    - 2. But not being another primarily political, social, or economic agency in the world.
    - 3. This is why Paul does what he does in Philemon. If he had commanded manumission, this would have subverted the heart of the gospel and rendered it an act of social and political revolution, obscuring its message of salvation in Christ alone by grace alone through faith alone.
    - 4. Some readings from Strange's *Empowered Witness* (Crossway, 2024).
- II. Current expressions of the kingdom and church contrary to the SOTC: A Reformed Critique of *Mere Christendom* and Christian Nationalism.
  - A. Doug Wilson's *Mere Christendom* project.
    - 1. Read from a review of his book on the same (*New Horizons*, March 2024).
    - 2. Further notes from the current issue of the *Mid-America Journal of Theology* (2023). If the Scripture does not contain a detailed plan for church government but sets forth Presbyterian principles, how much less so does the Bible contain a detailed plan for civil government? Thus the SOTC.
    - 3. As attractive as this may be in our age when all seems imperiled, this is not the proper way forward for the church: a proper doctrine of the SOTC is.
  - B. Even less so is the project called Christian Nationalism.
    - 1. To be sure, all biblical Christians may be impugned by mass media with that label these days.
    - 2. Another review on such cited from the *Mid-America Messenger* (Dec. 2023).
    - 3. And further notes from the current *Mid-America Journal of Theology*, especially regarding the prime work on this issue, Stephen Wolfe's *Case for Christian Nationalism*. Most recent debates show how fleshly the approach of

many in this regard is, especially Wolfe and the self-identified fascists, even over against Wilson, James White and others of the Antioch Declaration.

- C. How do we go forward in the current cultural climate?
1. In the church, with greater dedication than ever to the ministry, oracles, and ordinances of God, supporting them more than ever with our time, treasure, and talent. Though we may, in the church as an organism (Kuyper), engage in politics, we must never do so in a way that makes it paramount over faith.
    - a. The means of grace, heartily embraced and faithfully received, are more needed now than ever in the life of the corporate church.
    - b. We need to “keep our [theological] heads” with respect to this—to the ordinary ways of gathering and perfecting the saints—especially when others “all about us are losing theirs,” telling us that we need to do “other things” to attract to and keep inquirers (my installation address, Ps. 27).
  2. As far as what Christians should be doing in the world, we affirm that nothing is separate from faith.
    - a. That is to say, how we act in terms of our “worldly employments and recreations,” including our jobs, hobbies, political involvement, etc., must be done from a faith stance, from a proper living out of our Christian commitments in every sphere of life.
    - b. This does not mean, however, that this will look the same for everyone: some will live out their biblical convictions about politics in one way, and others will live them out differently (Romans 14). This is okay since the Bible doesn’t provide a detailed divine blueprint for all of life, and Christians of the same confessions will come to different conclusions about what it means to be a Christian in any given sphere. Some may believe in limited government of a republican sort; others, of a monarchy or oligarchy: the Bible does not say one is right and the other wrong.
    - c. We need to think Christianly, using wisdom in the application of Christian principles, so that we in the church as an institute might both distinguish ourselves from the world and give ourselves to the world.

Questions and Comments: