Van Ruler’s Concept of the Church

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During the 1930’s and 1940’s, De Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk lived through the culmination of more than 125 years of struggle concerning the nature of its constitution. Among the central issues of that struggle were matters such as the relation of church and state, the nature of the authority of the three confessional statements (Heidelberg Catechism, Belgic Confession with the Canons of Dort), the relation of the ordained office-bearers to the congregation, the reconciliation or recognition of serious doctrinal differences within the church, the ecumenical relationships to other churches in The Netherlands, and the significance of baptism to a “baptized people.” A. A. Van Ruler became intimately involved in these questions during his fourteen years as a minister in Hilversum. Many of his writings on the nature of the church were directly related to the attempts to work through the issues confronting his contemporaries in the church and the nation. Eventually he was chosen to be one of the representatives to Synod to defend the proposed new church order which ultimately was accepted by De Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk.

As he wrestled with the issues facing the church in The Netherlands during that period, he focused attention upon the relation of the church to the kingdom of God, election, the apostolate, the ordained offices, preaching, and the nature of the confessional statements. In the case of each of these, he was struggling with the problem of the relationship of his contemporary situation to that of the church in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. While he had a deep appreciation for biblical studies and for the whole range of church history and theology, the development of his thought was firmly rooted in the soil and atmosphere of The Netherlands. He seldom traveled outside his own country and was not personally involved in the meetings of the world-wide ecclesiastical assemblies and conferences. It was this profound wrestling with his own country’s history, theology, and church life which enabled him to open new paths for the understanding of the issues facing the church everywhere; while many others were working on a wide front, he was digging deep.

The specific problem with which he wrestled had to do with the shift in the relation of the church to the civil authorities between the sixteenth and the twentieth centuries. In the Belgic Confession, Article 36, it was confessed by the church that God had ordained kings, princes and authorities to protect the good, execute wrath on the wrong-doer, maintain the holy worship of the church, prevent idolatry and false religion, see that the Word of the Gospel is preached everywhere, and be responsible for the righteousness and social justice in the land. The state was thus seen to be an institution under the rule of God according to the Scriptures. In that context, the role of the church was understood more nar-
rowly than later centuries were inclined to view it. Where the whole realm was understood in some sense to be governed according to the Scriptures and where it was anticipated that the whole people would be baptized, it was sufficient to understand the marks of the church to be the pure preaching of the gospel, the pure administration of the sacraments as instituted by Christ, and the exercise of church discipline.¹ This view of the Belgic Confession was also the underlying doctrine of the Heidelberg Catechism and to a large extent of John Calvin.

By the end of the eighteenth century, the faith of the Reformed confessions regarding the relation of state and church was rapidly being replaced by the thought of the Enlightenment and of the French Revolution which understood churches to be religious societies and the state as having a more neutral attitude in religious matters. This shift posed a great problem to those who maintained the position of the Reformed confessions. Standing in a tradition which had always tried to give full weight to the Lordship of Christ over all of life, they could not accept a doctrine of the state which ignored that Lordship. This ruled out for them the two-realm approach of the Lutherans as well as anything which seemed to imply that the state was the realm of the devil or that it was a neutral area under the control of strictly human reason unrelated to the gospel. Neither were they ready to go back to the nature-grace hierarchy of the Roman tradition. At the same time, it seemed to be impossible simply to turn the clock back to the sixteenth century. This problem, which involved not only the formal role of the state but in many ways was decisive for one's attitude towards human life and culture in general, became the central issue and focal point of leading churchmen in The Netherlands throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, at least until World War II.

Van Ruler maintained that the question must be approached from the perspective of the kingdom of God. For our purposes, it is enough to note that in defining this concept, Van Ruler rejects the position of Ritschl (whose definition was accepted by Herman Bavinck!) that the kingdom of God consists of "the totality of all moral goods"; instead, he accepts the more eschatological approach of recent New Testament scholarship and understands the kingdom of God to be "the ultimate rule and saving activity of God with this world" ("het uiteindelijke en heilrijke handelen Gods met deze wereld").² In emphasizing the kingdom of God in its eschatological and soteriological fulness, Van Ruler was thus attempting simply to maintain the traditional Reformed emphasis on the sovereignty of God over all.

In this age, the kingdom of God is hidden with the Ascended Lord at the right hand of the Father; it is also present in this world in the powerful activity of the Holy Spirit, who gives signs of its presence in our age. Van Ruler cites a whole list of such positive signs of the presence of the kingdom. Among these are Scripture, preaching, the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper, the confessions and creeds, the conversion of individuals, and true experience in the faith (Bevinding), the apostolate, the ordained ministry, etc. The church is the
one great sign of the presence of salvation and the kingdom. The precise relationship of the individual signs such as Scripture, preaching, or the sacraments to the church is a complex one, according to Van Ruler. Ordinarily we think of them as being within the church and certainly they are all signs of the presence of God within the church. Yet, it is at least as true that many of the signs were first present and then the church was built around them. Certainly, the doctrine of the canonicity of Scripture is a clear reference to the fact that the Scriptures have authority as the Word of God to men everywhere and that the church does not control or totally encompass that Word. The apostles are the foundation of the church and thus, in some sense, prior to the church. With each of the signs in its own way, one soon notices this ambiguous relationship between the church and the sign. At the boundaries some things seem to flow into the church and then out again. This has been true of schools, hospitals, theological education, etc.

The fact that the church has been placed in the world as the totality of the positive signs of the presence of the kingdom leads Van Ruler to state that election is the heart of the church and the apostolate stands as the essence of the church. Nothing in the church rests in and of itself. The church and each of the signs of the kingdom are present through history from moment to moment because they have been placed and are maintained in the predestinating activity of God. The church is elected of God to be God's instrument as Israel was elected of God as his instrument. Thus the Heidelberg Catechism, question and answer fifty-four, has made an important point for the Reformed tradition by interpreting the phrase of the Creed, "the holy catholic church" from the perspective of divine election. When Van Ruler considers the relationship between church and world, he emphasizes that election of the church is not so much in order that the church may be saved as that it is for the sake of the salvation of the world. Nevertheless, he refuses to allow any of the signs of the kingdom, including the sign of the church, to be understood purely in terms of function. All of these are not only used, but in the election of God they are. Under God, they receive an existence of their own with which God wrestles. He wrestles with the hearts of the individual elect and with office-bearers. He wrestles with the fellowship of the church and with the church in its confessional statements and in its church order. In the church and in the hearts of elect individuals, the Word of God begins to be integrated into human existence and begins to re-form the world as the first-fruits of the Spirit.

While the Reformers had been aware of the importance of the doctrine of election to one's understanding of the church, their situation within Christendom did not encourage them to develop adequately the concept of the apostolate, or what is more often called "mission" in the Anglo-Saxon world. It is essential to the being of the ordained ministry and of the church that they have been sent into the world to be used as an instrument of God. Within the apostolic task, one can distinguish two major branches of mission. The one task is evangelism in the sense of proclaiming the simple gospel of Jesus, and calling men to repent,
receive forgiveness and be baptized. The other task is that of “kerstening,” (which literally means “Christianizing,” but can perhaps be better translated as “sanctifying”). Men are converted; things and institutions of society are “gekerstened” by the power of the Spirit of God.7

The distinction between evangelism and kerstening has made it possible for a much more clear discussion to take place in The Netherlands than has been possible in the United States where the word “mission” or even “evangelism” has recently been used to cover both aspects, with the result that considerable confusion develops concerning whether one is talking about the call to conversion or social action. Van Ruler often indicated that both aspects are essential in the apostolate, although he did not think that we can succeed in achieving full integration between the two aspects or even easily do both at the same time. At this point we should note that Van Ruler believed that in this age we do not see the kingdom present in all of its fulness. He emphasized that we can know it only in fragments, in “hiddenness” (like yeast in the dough), and that it thus seems to have elements of internal contradiction, as the Corinthian Church experienced with its multiplicity of gifts. The church must be ready to accept the gifts as the Spirit gives them, even when it finds it practically impossible to integrate everything which comes. At one point, Van Ruler compares our movements to the ice-skater who proceeds by going first on one skate and then on another without having the line made by one skate connect with the other. He also uses the illustration of the child who skips across a small stream by jumping from one stone to another without necessarily following the more logical series of jumps.8

The apostolate of the church indicates the relation between the church and the world. In the cross of Jesus Christ the world can be understood as the totality of all of the negative signs of the kingdom of God. It is that which stands under the judgment of God. But this is not God's final intention for the world, for Jesus Christ came to save the world. God’s intention is that the world should be, in the words of Calvin, the “Theater of the Glory of God”—that is to say, the destiny and significance of all things is that the name of God should be praised, his kingdom come and his will be done. In the eschaton, all things must be summed up in Christ and handed over to the Father.9 In the will of God, the church is elected by God for the sake of the world. Election does not mean that a number of persons will be taken out of the world and saved; God's intention is that the church will be the instrument of apostolic mission to the world, that God's salvation may be established in the world.

The impact of Van Ruler’s emphasis upon election, apostolate, and covenant becomes more clear when one notes his understanding of theocracy, preaching, the ordained ministry, and the sacraments. It was in these areas that he attempted to break through the problem of how to be faithful to the Reformed tradition in his contemporary situation.

It was noted above that in his emphasis on the kingdom of God, Van Ruler
was trying to remain loyal to the traditional Reformed emphasis on the sovereignty of God over all. In the face of considerable opposition in The Netherlands, he steadfastly maintained that one could not escape the issue of "theocracy." If God is Lord of all, then one cannot be satisfied to talk only in terms of personal relationships or in terms of the church. Not only individuals, but social and public life come under the rule of God and are called to be sanctified. The gospel of Jesus Christ involves salvation to eternal life; it equally involves the sanctification of life in the world. The world must be "re-formed" according to Christ.

The church, then, is the covenant people of God in this world. Unlike the Roman Church, the Reformed tradition has refused to accept the doctrine that the church is an extension of the incarnation or a supernatural element ruling over the natural in this world. Rather, the church is that community in which the totality of positive signs of the kingdom established faith and order in a chaotic world. As was noted above, these are placed in the church for the sake of the world.

Faith and order come into the life of the church under the preaching of the gospel. Van Ruler accepted the distinction made by Hoedemaker who maintained that preaching had two aspects, the "proclamation of the gospel" and the "administration of the Word." If one does only the first, the gospel is easily transposed into idealistic formulae or into an other-wordly faith. Therefore preaching in the full sense of the word is meant the placing of all things on earth under the light of the preaching of the gospel. In the administration of the word there is no subject which is excluded in advance from consideration by the preacher. From the pulpit, one deals with God's reign everywhere on earth and indicates how all things stand under the authority of Scripture.

The "re-forming" (Ordering) of the world also takes place around the sacraments. The baptism of infants as "your seed" begins to bring biological circumstances into covenant relationships, with the result that one begins to speak of a "baptized nation," which is expected to listen to the Scriptures. But at this point it is more important to note that the Reformed tradition has always emphasized the importance of discipline and the sanctified life around the Lord's Table. Ecclesiastical discipline "re-forms" one area of life in the midst of the chaotic world.

Having considered how God reigns and "re-forms" life in the church for the sake of the world, it becomes necessary for Van Ruler to indicate more carefully how the church is related to other institutions in the world, particularly to the civil government. He states that Calvin and the Reformed tradition have been correct in refusing to give the church a superior position to the state and other institutions, so far as the ordering of public life is concerned. Re-forming is different from conquering. It is also different from a program of world-improvement. Within the reign of God the role of the state is differentiated from that of the church; they are not antithetical to each other as the sectarians have often
thought; neither does the one ultimately rule over the other. Like other things in the kingdom of God, they stand next to each other as instruments in God's hand without being fully integrated with each other.

Thus, so far as the civil government is concerned, visible theocracy is not an ideal after which we must strive. Theocracy, after all, is a gift of God, not an achievement on our part. But at the same time, we must not hinder the coming of the kingdom by deciding beforehand that the differentiation or separation of church and state means that the civil government or all public life must be "neutral" or "non-sectarian" or "purely secular." We who have heard the preaching of the gospel and received the sacraments cannot help but confess that all life stands under the authority of God who has revealed himself through the Scriptures. In this sense, the church and politics are not heterogeneous quantities.

The relation of church to the world is further illuminated by considering Van Ruler's position that in the eschaton the church will disappear. Then the sanctified world will live before the Trinity as did Adam in the Garden. In the age to come, the created world and men will be what God looked toward in the creation. In our time the church already lives eschatologically, looking toward that great day when God will be all in all. Thus, ultimately God's concern and the church's concern is not with the church but with the "kerstening" of the world.

This hope is already portrayed in a limited way by the relation of the ordained ministry to the congregation and by the relation of the congregation to the world. The ordained ministry is placed in the midst of the congregation as Christ's representatives. The minister, elder, and deacon represent the diffusion of the apostolic office in the kingdom of God and proclaim God's gospel, his sanctification, and his social righteousness to the congregation and to the world. Around the ordained minister, the vocation of the congregation is to live that which the office-bearers represent. The Spirit goes with the congregation in its life in the world, struggling with the day to day problems of life and creating order amid the injustice of the world. But in doing this, the congregation does not turn everything into a sort of church. Instead, it is concerned that agriculture, education, government, etc., should be done with integrity before God. They must become God's deputies in the world, rather than instruments of self-seeking men. Van Ruler also indicated that just as the interaction of the office-bearers and the congregation proleptically represent the relation of God and the world in the eschaton, so the congregation in a sense becomes the office-bearer of the Spirit to that which stands outside the church. Concerning the people living outside the church, one can hope that they will enter the covenant community in faith. But the institutions of society and the instruments of society are not to become ecclesiastical in nature. Education, agriculture, civil government, etc., are all elements within the reign of God, but Calvin and his followers were correct in seeing them as elements distinct from the church. The theological reason for the distinctness is that all of these other institutions are ways in which men relate to each other and to God.
and grow to maturity before him. The church is quite distinct from the others in the sense that it is an emergency measure used by God because of human sin. In this age, it is God's great sign that the kingdom is already present in a godless world; in the new heaven and the new earth, the signs will have been replaced by the visibility of the new reality.  

The significance of Van Ruler's doctrine of the church for American discussion is apparent at several points. The first, is that in his concept of the relationship of the ordained ministry to the congregation and of the church to the world, it becomes clear how the church acts as a "minister" or "servant" in the world, as well as in the relationship of "status" to "function." On the one hand, the church ministers, not directly by trying to be "relevant," but simply by being itself. It is the place where the gospel is proclaimed and administered in all of its orthodoxy; it is the place where the sacraments are purely celebrated and discipline is maintained, regardless of whether the world at the moment sees any sense in the whole matter. Van Ruler always maintained that in becoming God's instrument for these activities in the world, the church in a way also comes to have a being of its own. It is the communion of the saints, a resting place for weary souls. On the other hand, the church knows that its life is for the sake of the world and that its ultimate concern is that the "laity" or the people of the world live truly before God in the world. In this sense the church is always ready to die to self in order that the world may have life. It does not sorrow when a hospital once operated by the church becomes a private or state hospital, providing that the institution knows what it now means to be a place of healing.  

The second important point is that within the kingdom of God in this age, there are more categories than "sacred" and "secular," or "Christian" and "non-Christian" or "pagan." To say that an institution of society is something other than church is not to consign it to the secular realm. Not only the church, but other institutions as well must be allowed to read and accept the truth of Scripture, for the Scriptures are canonical truth for the world even more than for the church. We must learn to discern how the Spirit of God is working in many institutions and in many ways in our society. Some of these institutions will want to confess the name of the Lord; we must not hinder them from doing so. Some will want to refrain from making such credal professions of faith but will want to open meetings with prayer. They must have the freedom to do so. Some may wish to have the Scriptures read without comment; let them hear the pure word of God without comment from the church or anyone else.  

The third important point is that his analysis can help Americans break through the polarization of evangelism and social action. His emphasis on the two aspects of the apostolate and his recognition that while both must be present they will never be completely in harmony on earth can help Christians better understand the need for role and interest differentiation in the life of the church. In recent years ministers and ecclesiastical assemblies have often been criticized for their
strong advocacy of social action movements. There has been good reason for that
criticism, for the ministers in so doing often did seem to be forsaking their primary
callings of evangelism, solid preaching of the gospel, and pastoral concern for
the people. But the defense of the ministers is that the church has been neglecting
the social ministry. Perhaps the problem has been that the deacons, representing
social action, have on the one hand been kept out of the ecclesiastical assemblies,
except for consistories where they experience much role-confusion with the elders
and thereby become elders-in-training rather than deacons. On the other hand,
while the Reformed tradition has placed the elder next to the minister, the deacon
has been kept at a greater distance. Thereby the minister, in his “administering the
Word” in sermons, could not easily consult with and be admonished by the deacon
about living the Word in the world. Van Ruler can help the Reformed tradition
with its three offices to break through the polarization which unfortunately dom-
inates so much of the American ecclesiastical scene.

1 For an excellent discussion of the historical setting and problems involved in these three
marks as the way by which one recognizes the true church, see J. Piet, The Road Ahead,
2 A. A. Van Ruler, De Vervulling van de Wet, (Nijkerk: G. F. Callenbach, n. v., 1947),
pp. 52-68.
3 Religie en Politiek, p. 18.
5 Theologie van het Apostolaat. p. 20.
6 Van Ruler places equal stress on the doctrine of the covenant aspect of the church. He
relates his discussion of the covenant to that of election. See Religie en Politiek, pp. 69-86.
7 See De Vervulling van de Wet, pp. 516-536 and passim.
8 Religie en Politiek, p. 67.
9 Theologie van het Apostolaat, p. 47.
10 For the above, see Religie en Politiek, pp. 48-51.
11 For a discussion of Van Ruler’s concept of the ordained ministry and the congregation,
see Bijzonder en Algemeen Ambt, (Callenbach, 1952), esp. pp. 16-22.
12 In this paper we follow the line of thought set forth by Van Ruler during most of his
life. During the last several years of this life his health did not permit him to preach.
In that period he attended weekly the Jans Kerk in Utrecht and developed a new appreci-
cation for the liturgy. As a result, he approached the doctrine of the church from the
point of view of the worshipper and set this forth in a book that is equally theological
and doctrinal. Waarom zou ik naar de Kerk Gaan? (“Why should I go to church?”).
13 The problem of tolerance is important in Van Ruler’s thought. For his full considera-
tion of the matter, see “Theocratie en Tolerantie,” in Theologisch Werk, (Nijkerk, Callen-