

Book Review

The Nature, Government and Function of the Church: A Reassessment

Stephen C. Perks

The Kuyper Foundation 1997

Taunton, England 116 pages, paperback

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We first read this book at the time it was published, albeit somewhat hastily. At that time we were quite favourably impressed. We did not, however, realise then that the Christian Reconstructionist¹ (hereafter CR) view of the church which Perks was promoting was substantially different from the Biblical and confessional teaching on the church. Since that first reading, however, we have had further contact with CR and thus also the opportunity to study its teaching on the church, especially in relation to the Kingdom of God.² In the light of that study and a rereading of Perks' book, we have come to see that Perks' view of the church is fatally flawed and dangerous - the more so because it is not immediately obvious that therein he effectively undermines the Biblical and Reformed doctrine of the church. Our main purpose in this review, therefore, is present our serious criticisms of the book's teaching on the Church.

We recognise the fact that Perks and his associates have distanced themselves to a large degree from CR and no longer even

¹ There are several branches of CR. Most salient are: that led by R.J. Rushdoony in the USA, next, that by Perks and his associates, and another represented by those who are or have been associated with so-called "Tyler theology" (the reference is to Tyler, Texas, a former centre of CR, and still the home of the Institute of Christian Economics). This second branch has held a higher view of the church than does Perks, though even *its* teaching on the church is unsatisfactory. Perks and his associates, however, dismiss them and their "ecclesiocentric (church-centred) vision" as "a reversal of the reconstructionist vision" (Andrew Sandlin, "Recapturing the Vision of Christian Reconstructionism," *Christianity and Society*, vol. VI, no. 3, July 1996, pp. 18-24).

² The results of that study have been published in the *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal* Nov. 1998 under the title "Kingdom and Church in 'Christian' Reconstructionism," and are available in manuscript form from the author of this review at 7 Lislunna Road, Kells, Ballymena, Co. Antrim, BT42 3NR, N. Ireland, UK.

identify themselves as "Reconstructionists" - this in reaction to the excesses of some of the American representatives of the movement. Nevertheless, Perks still teaches the view of the church held by CR and its guru, R.J. Rushdoony.³ That view of the church is neither Biblical nor confessional nor Reformed.

Perks shows his hand already in his "Introduction." There, explaining why he has written another book on "the nature, government and function of the church," Perks says that "the church, by and large, has not yet arrived at a satisfactory conclusion regarding this matter" (pp. 7, 8), and so he rejects the Reformational, and we believe Biblical, doctrine of the church, at least at several key points.

What Perks offers is a redefinition of the visible Church that leaves plenty of room for his CR "dominion theology." Apart from that Perks pretty much follows the traditional Reformed teaching on the church in the first part of the book where he writes of the "nature" of the church. There, for the most part, he makes and follows the usual distinctions between church militant and triumphant, visible and invisible, etc. It is in his "redefinition" of the visible Church that he goes wrong.

Perks, then, distinguishes two aspects of the visible church. To the visible church, according to him, belong both the institutional Church, and what he calls "the body of Christ, the company of the regenerate" (p. 24); or, with reference to the Westminster Confession of Faith (XXV, ii), "all those throughout the world who profess faith in Christ" (p. 25).

Throughout the book Perks identifies these two aspects of the visible church as "Church" and "CHURCH," the former referring to the institutional Church and the latter to the body of believers. The latter, as is evident from the fact that it is written with capital letters, is the visible Church in the highest sense of the word, and the primary meaning of the word *ecclesia* (the Greek word translated "Church") in Scripture.

This all sounds right and good until one realises what Perks is actually saying. Indeed, it is easy to miss what is Perks' point if one does not have some knowledge of CR teaching and aims or does not read him critically and carefully.

Perks does not deny that Church and

³ Cf. R.J. Rushdoony, *Systematic Theology* (Ross House, 1994), pp. 669-784.

CHURCH are "the same . . . but viewed from different perspectives" (p.12). Nevertheless, he makes a sharp disjunction between them. In redefining the visible Church primarily in terms of God's people as believers, Perks considers them to be the CHURCH apart from their institutional connections. That CHURCH, in other words, does not necessarily exist in and through and in connection with the institutional Church. He writes: "The CHURCH may certainly be conceived of apart from the institutional organisation precisely because Christ so conceived of it. (John) Murray's definition - i.e., the strict identification of the body of Christ as coterminous in every respect with the institutional Church - severely limits the body of Christ in its mission and function in the world. Indeed, it cuts the body of Christ off almost totally from the cultural mandate" (p. 33).

"Thus the CHURCH visible and militant is the body of Christians wherever they are and in whatever they are doing: the Christian teacher, business man, house-wife, mother, parent, barmaid, butcher, baker, candlestick maker, at work, at play, at prayer, at home, etc." (pp. 28, 29).

This body of believers, as CHURCH does not only function apart from the institutional Church and its calling to preach the gospel and administer the ordinances God has given. It has an entirely different function:

"The primary function of the body of Christ on earth, therefore, is not focused on the Church (he refers here, of course, to the institutional church; RH) but on the kingdom of God and thus on the Christian life, a life lived out in service to God according to his word. It is only with such a focus that the Christian works for or serves (i.e. worships) God in the totality of life and being, thereby bringing the whole of life into captivity to the obedience of Christ (2 Cor. 10:5). It is through this whole-life service and the effect this has on man's culture that the kingdom of God is realised in history" (p. 65-66).

In fulfilling that function the CHURCH is involved in every area of social and political life. Thus, for example, believers involved in politics are the CHURCH involved in politics:

"It would be wrong for the Church as an institution to seek to do the work of the magistrate. There is a Biblical separation of powers here. Some members of the body of Christ, however, are called to be magistrates

and they must exercise their vocation as Christians and as ambassadors of Christ. . . . The members of the body of Christ who are not magistrates will also exercise political influence via their votes at elections and via any other form of political action they may take. The body of Christ (that is, the CHURCH; RH) will thus be involved - as a group of responsible citizens in areas where the institutional Church may not go" (pp. 34, 35).

This, of course, is sheer confusion. Believers, living and working in the world, do not cease to be members of the Church, representing it and working for it also in politics. But it cannot be said that they, in that capacity, are the CHURCH - no more than all the American expatriates living and working in various places around the world are AMERICA, even though they do not cease to be Americans and to represent their country no matter where they live and what they do.

It is here, too, that Perks is out of step with the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, though he quotes from it, for while the Confession does define the visible church as composed of "all those throughout the world that profess the true religion; and of their children" (XXV, ii), the *Confession* makes it clear that this "body of believers" does not exist apart from the institutional Church. It is unto that "catholic visible Church" that Christ has given "the ministry, oracles, and ordinances of God" (XXV, iii). And, what is even more significant, that visible, catholic Church, according to the *Confession* is made up of "particular Churches." They, not believers, are the "members thereof" (XXV, iv).

That Perks does not want the *Westminster* view of the church is clear from his rejection of John Murray's description of the church. Murray, cited by Perks (p. 30), says:

"It is all-important to bear in mind that the church of God is an institution. It may never be conceived of apart from the organization of the people of God visibly expressed and in discharge of the ordinances instituted by Christ.⁴

Perks calls this unfortunate, inconsistent, reductionist and unbiblical, and denies that Jesus ever spoke of His CHURCH in this "constricted sense" (p. 30). And so, in the interest of his CR presuppositions, he goes on with his rejection of Murray's views:

"By identifying the body of Christ as strictly coterminous with the institutional Church

⁴ John Murray, *Collected Works*, vol. I, p. 237f.

Murray leaves the CHURCH - i.e., the body of Christ - helpless to affect and preserve the culture in which it lives by a "hands on" encounter with and in that culture, thereby denying to the community of faith the means of bringing the whole of society into conformity with the whole counsel of God's word. It is as if the CHURCH and society were the crews of two different ships. The most that the CHURCH can do is to bellow from its own ship to the ship of culture information about how the ship of culture should steer away from the rocks that threaten to destroy it. But the CHURCH can never get into the ship of culture to do the steering" (p. 34).

It is in this connection with all this that Perks de-emphasises the institute Church. In fact, he finds it "hardly mentioned in Scripture:"

"The primary emphasis of the New Testament is on the kingdom of God, not the institutional Church. Indeed, the gospels hardly speak directly and specifically of the institutional church at all and with the exception of Mt. 18:15-20 Jesus in his ministry on earth did not give detailed teaching on this aspect of the Christian life, leaving it to the apostles to work out later; and even the apostles, at least in Scripture, did not go into any great detail, giving only general principles, and thus much freedom, for the Church to build upon The institutional Church simply was not the focus of Jesus' teaching during his earthly ministry, nor is it the primary focus of the Bible generally" (p. 73).

Strangely enough, though, Perks admits that the majority of references to the church in the New Testament are to the institutional Church: "Of the 112 occurrences of ἐκκλησία (ecclesia) in the New Testament the vast majority refer to a particular assembly or local congregation of believers (the visible institutional church)" Nevertheless, these references are simply "narrative, descriptive, and vocative uses of the term that have little bearing on the development of a detailed ecclesiology" (footnote 52, p. 73).

Perks is saying that even though most of the references in Scripture are to the institutional Church, we can learn little or nothing from them about the nature of the church. It would seem to us, however, that the sheer number of references to the institutional

Church says something at least about its importance, and that it is far more important than Perks makes out.

Having redefined the visible church, Perks also redefines its calling and function. While admitting that the calling of the institutional Church has to do especially with "the maintenance and practise of the Christian public religious cultus" (p. 12), i.e., with preaching, sacraments, discipline, and worship, that calling is limited and relatively unimportant, and that it is not the calling of the visible CHURCH in its most important manifestation:

"The task of teaching in the institutional Church is a function of the ordained ministry. It is not the central activity or focus of the CHURCH'S calling, and neither is any other activity that may take place in the church. . . . It [the Church] has sought primarily its own increase and in so doing has failed Christ by failing to fulfil its vitally important, but limited, role of equipping the saints for service and dominion in the world" (p. 83).

"It is vitally important that the CHURCH should not be reduced to the institutional Church, therefore, if the body of Christ is to claim the world for Christ and bring all things into conformity with God's word" (p. 37).

That institutional "Church," of course, is not the CHURCH in the highest and broadest sense, nor its calling the calling of the CHURCH, according to Perks. The calling of the CHURCH is defined in terms of the calling of individual believers, rather than in terms of the institutional Church's calling to preach, administer sacraments and conduct worship. So Perks says, anyway:

"The Church as an institution is limited in its field of operation, God-ordained and essential though that field is. The body of Christ, the CHURCH considered as the people of God, the community of faith, has a much wider brief, however. Its calling is to take dominion over the whole earth in the name of Christ, to possess his inheritance (Ps. 2:7-12; Rev. 11:15), which is the CHURCH'S inheritance also by adoption into the household and family of God through union with Christ" (pp. 35, 36).

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All this, then, is taught in the interest of promoting CR dominion theology and its peculiar view of the kingdom of God. CR insists that

the kingdom is something broader than and different from the Church and that the Church is only the means or instrument by which the kingdom comes:

"The role of the Church as an institution is ancillary to what was the primary focus of Jesus' teaching: the kingdom of God in the widest sense. His emphasis was on the kingdom and thus on the life of faith and obedience to God's word, by which the kingdom of God is manifested in history" (p. 74).

"The Christian faith is not centred primarily on the Church but on the kingdom of God and thus on the Christian life. And the kingdom of God is necessarily wider than the Church. The animating spirit of Christian service is outward: to go into all the world and preach the gospel, by word and deed. The building of the kingdom of God on earth is the primary focus of Christian service" (p. 68).

The kingdom of CR is a "Christianised" society or culture which comes through fulfilling the cultural mandate (p. 33), claiming the world for Christ (p. 37), "service and dominion in the world" (p. 83), "taking control of the ship of culture" (p. 34), "affect(ing) culture for good, claim(ing) it for Christ, and transform(ing) it by his word into 'heaven on earth'" (p. 69).⁵ The establishment of that kingdom is seen as the chief purpose of God in history, and the church, therefore, is only one of the ways by which that kingdom comes.

So, too, the most important aspect of the

⁵ In footnote 28, pp. 27 and 28, and on pages 69 and 70 Perks denies that heaven is the eternal dwelling of believers. It is not entirely clear what he means, but he repudiates the desire to "go to heaven" and talk of "life in heaven" as unbiblical and pagan ideas of the afterlife (this in spite of Matt. 5:12; 7:21; Jn. 14:2, 3; II Cor. 5:1; Heb. 10:34; I Pet. 1:4 and a host of other passages). Though it does not seem that he actually denies the existence of heaven, he says, "From the way some Christians talk it seems they expect to inherit 'heaven.' They will be sorely disappointed. It's all going to be down here in the nitty-gritty of physical life. So you had better get used to it down here where for mankind life is lived" (p. 69). Obviously, it is not a large step from Perks' notions of "heaven on earth" to a denial of any heavenly inheritance for believers. Indeed, though Perks himself does not deny it, it is not a large step from his denial of a heavenly inheritance, to a denial of the final resurrection, as in the teaching of David Chilton, a well-known CR author.

church as far as the coming of the kingdom is concerned is not the institutional Church, but according to Perks, the CHURCH as the body of believers living their lives in the world, is far more important, though even it is only one means among others for the coming of the kingdom. In relation to that CHURCH and its calling to exercise dominion in every area of life, the institutional Church has its only role, the very limited role of training believers for their service in the world and preparing them to fulfil their dominion mandate:

"The institutional Church is not the kingdom of God, it is merely one element of the kingdom, though a vitally important one, namely, the training and equipping arm of the kingdom. It is there to prepare and fully equip the CHURCH for its task in the world" (p. 84).

"But the Church (again the institutional Church; RH), through its ministry, must equip the saints - i.e., the CHURCH in the widest sense as the body of Christ - for action and service in the political realm by teaching the biblical principles of civil government and civic responsibility set down in God's word" (p. 63).

"Finally, the function of the Church has been considered. Here we saw that the function of the Church is five-fold: (i) to teach the word of God, (ii) to administer the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper, (iii) to engage in corporate public worship and prayer, (iv) to care for those in need (the diaconal function), and (v) to maintain discipline in terms of doctrine and morals. All these functions, however, have as their primary purpose the equipping of the saints, the body of Christ (the CHURCH; RH), for their wider service in the world, i.e., the cultural mandate and the Great Commission - in the broadest sense what I have called Christian Reconstruction" (p. 81).

The implications of this teaching are many. The salvation, preservation, and glorification of the church is no longer seen as the purpose and goal of God's work in history contrary to Ephesians 1:22, 23; 2:20-22; 3:20, 21; 5:27; I Timothy 3:5; Hebrews 12:22-24; I Peter 2:5-9; Revelation 4:4; 7:15; 19:6, 7; 21:3, 10, 11, 22-24. The church *ala* dispensationalism is, in this way, therefore, trivialised and relegated to a secondary place in history.

Not only that, but the institute Church and its work, including the work of the offices and of the preaching of the gospel is seen to be of relatively minor importance. It is only the

"training arm" of the kingdom all its work only training exercises for the kingdom.

Perks refers to the belief that the Church is the goal of God's work in history as "ecclesiomania" (p. 67) and idolatry (p. 83). The idea that the institutional Church and its work of preaching of the gospel and administering the ordinances are important in themselves produces what he calls "ghetto churches, impotent and irrelevant" (p. 66), or "Protestant monasteries, little enclaves of spirituality retreating from the battlefield" (p. 67).

Until the institutional Church realises that it is only a training ground, and until the CHURCH sees that its real calling is to take dominion over the earth "it will be boredom, irrelevance and stupidity in the Church 'mummy factory' as usual" (p. 84). Thus he arrogantly writes off the ordinary work, life, fellowship, ordinances and worship of the institutional Church, and the whole institutional life of those churches that are not interested in earthly dominion.

His view of the Church also allows him and all those who hold these views to ignore denominational boundaries and distinctives in their seeking of the kingdom and to cooperate with other "Christians" over a very wide spectrum in seeking to establish this kingdom. Denominational differences, differences of doctrine, government and worship, mean little, since the visible CHURCH is not to be defined first of all in terms of congregations or denominations, but in terms of believers and their calling in the world.

Having redefined the nature and calling of the Church, it is not surprising that Perks also goes wrong in what he says about Church government. In his opinion the kind of Church government a congregation has makes little difference as long as it is godly (p. 40). Indeed, as Perks himself says;

"the principles of Church government set forth in this essay, however, can be applied, in the main, to Episcopal, Congregational, and Presbyterian Churches" (p. 40).

This follows inevitably from Perks' devaluation of the institutional Church. If it has but a very limited role in history and is but the means to an end, surely the whole subject of Church government matters little.

There is much more in the book we could disagree with, but that is not our purpose

here. Our purpose in this review is simply to point out what we believe to be a fundamental fault in the doctrine of the church taught by Perks and CR. As a "reassessment" of the "nature, government, and function of the church" this book contributes nothing and is a disaster as far as providing any hope for the institutional Church and its present sad condition.

All this is not to say that there is nothing of value in the book. Perks makes some cogent points especially in pointing out the errors and erroneous practices of modern Churches. Especially valuable is his thorough and interesting critique of the tendency in most Presbyterian and Reformed Churches to a kind of "Protestant popery" or heirarchicalism, something that effectively denies and destroys the priesthood of all believers.

In Appendices A and C he deals with this matter in some detail, pointing out some of the problems he and others have with this so-called "high" or "magisterial" presbyterianism. There, too, he points out rightly that the "independency" of John Cotton, John Owen and others like them was by no means the same as modern independency. It was, as Perks shows, in some respects more Biblical than the "magisterial" presbyterianism that is often advocated today, according to which the Church is ruled "from the top down" and the ordinary members have little say or function in the life and work of the Church.

The better parts of the book, therefore, are to be found where Perks is critiquing existing churches and pointing out their weaknesses. The trouble is that while he does an excellent job of tearing down what needs tearing down, he builds nothing in its place. Indeed, he does not even leave much of a foundation on which to build. It would be difficult to build a hen-house on the foundation Perk's leaves, much less the church of Jesus Christ. But, then, Perks seems little interested in building the church.

Like all those with the same doctrine of the church his real interest is elsewhere. The church seems to figure in Perks' teaching like a man's wife, who cooks, bears children, etc., while the husband focuses all his love toward a mistress. That is not God's attitude toward the church or the way He deals with it. He sees it not as a means to an end, but as the body of Jesus Christ, that for which He gave Christ (Eph. 1:22), the object of His purpose and love, "the fulness (completion) of him who filleth all in all" (Eph. 1:23).