

A PEOPLE OF HIS OWN

The LORD sends forth from Zion your mighty scepter. Rule in the midst of your enemies! Your people will offer themselves freely on the day of your power, in holy garments; from the womb of the morning, the dew of your youth will be yours.

PSALM 110:2, 3

The first half of the first volume of *Pro Rege* was a protest against the darkening and undermining of the Christian confession of Jesus' kingship. The second half was devoted to a scriptural exposition of the essence and nature of this kingship. The pages that follow comprise a much more extensive series of chapters that place us before practical questions regarding the calling, task, and responsibility that Christ's kingship imposes upon us as his subjects.

§ 1

The kingship of Christ does not depend on us in any way. It arose entirely outside of our own doing and finds the sole source of its authority in the Triune God and his divine ordination. Nevertheless, it has been recognized from days of old that there is no such thing as a king without subjects, and that a kingdom without citizens is not real but exists in the imagination alone. When we speak of Jesus' kingship, therefore, we must think immediately also of ourselves as the subjects of King Jesus and of what is demanded of us in that capacity as his subjects. At the same time,

we must be careful not to draw any direct conclusions from this recognition, as if what the redeemed must do for Christ as their King makes his kingship depend in any way on their devoted efforts. The foundation on which the edifice of Jesus' kingship has been built is not the faith and devotion of his subjects, but rests in God's good pleasure alone.

Our Reformed ancestors did not share the viewpoint of the Remonstrants in this regard, and they maintained against them that the salvation of Jesus' subjects could not be seen as depending on human free will; instead, it had to flow out of the ordination of the counsel of God. They argued that if one's salvation depended on free will, then all could possibly choose to turn against Christ, such that in the end none would gain salvation or be subject to our King. As we have noted, this simply cannot be. The kingship of Christ has always stood firm. And so he had to have loyal subjects throughout the course of the ages. This was the reason conversion could not be made to depend on human free will. Consequently, whoever maintained the kingship of Christ also had to follow the Reformed in their firm rejection of the position that held the power of free will to be decisive.

The extent to which the question of free will dominated that previous debate lies beyond the scope of the present chapters. However, insofar as it has to do with the general relationship between our King and his subjects, it is important for the argument we are developing here. It implies the following truth: the same ordination of the Triune God that has produced the kingship of Christ also ensures that this King will never be without subjects. The King and his subjects find each other because the same ordination of God that gives the King his subjects also gives these subjects their King. At the same time, out of that one ordination follows what that King must do for his subjects, and conversely, what the subjects must do for their King. They had no choice in deciding whether they wanted to be his subjects. The calling of those elected by God is irresistible. Christ himself witnessed that he himself did not take his people, but that they had been given to him by the Father, and that for that reason Satan cannot snatch them out of his hand [see John 10:29].

But that is not the end of it. If the subjects of this King do not come under his kingly scepter by their own choice but instead by virtue of the ordination of God, it also cannot be left up to their will to decide how they will serve this King. Rather, by their irresistible calling they have already come under the law of the kingdom, and they are bound to give

to Christ what the law of this kingdom demands from them. There is not even a hint of popular sovereignty here! Christ's subjects have no part at all in establishing the law of the kingdom. It is the Father who places us under Christ, and it is Christ who, according to the Father's ordination, regulates the relationship in which his subjects dwell with him as their King.

Christ's subjects do not enter a kingdom in which the laws for living still have to be drawn up. Instead, they find that the law has been proclaimed and is already in place, and that it is even more unchanging than any law of the Medes or Persians that was ever proclaimed in Susa. To that law they must submit; according to that law they must live; and in accordance with that law of the kingdom they must honor their King, serve him, and fight for him. Yet this does not destroy the power of their will, because the Father who calls them and gives them to the Son also bends them through the Holy Spirit, so that in the end they will nothing other than what the Father wills of them in the law of the kingdom. This is expressed very clearly in Psalm 110:2, 3: "The LORD sends forth from Zion your mighty scepter. Rule in the midst of your enemies!"—words that are immediately followed by the statement: "Your people will offer themselves freely on the day of your power. . . ."

The notion of a people of the Lord is one that we must maintain. In the past, this notion was readily acknowledged by all, but over the course of the last fifty years we can detect an increasing resistance against it, even among Christians. This resistance has grown so much so that one now hardly hears about the people of the Lord outside of Reformed circles anymore. A more serious circumstance is that even when the people of the Lord are mentioned in these half-modernized circles a certain aversion appears on the faces of many. In fact, soon some will protest—at times with great bitterness—that it is not fitting to speak of the people of the Lord. To refer to the *congregation* or to talk about *believers* is one thing; but, they argue, to speak of a *people* is an Old Testament custom that no longer has a place in the New Covenant dispensation. They also find it inappropriate to talk about believers as Jesus' subjects. We have been delivered, we are God's children, so the argument goes; the term *subjects*, they claim, is overly harsh, has overly legal connotations, and is considered too unspiritual.

Our aim in this present chapter is not to deny that the expression *the people of the Lord* has in many respects occasioned misuse. As so often

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happens with all such expressions, they are easily taken out of the spiritual context in which the Holy Spirit has placed them, and are all too often applied randomly and improperly.

In certain quiet circles, for example, it indeed became customary for people to apply the concept of the people of the Lord simply to their own circle. In a particular town or city there was a certain number of believers, each of whom acknowledged the others as true children of God. Their social interaction was restricted to that small circle, and they shut themselves up in it. As a result, it was very tempting to acknowledge only those belonging to that circle as the subjects of Jesus, and this fed the notion that they, to the exclusion of all others, made up the people of the Lord in that town or city. This narrowmindedness involved no small amount of spiritual arrogance. What was even worse was when some concluded that the image of Christ often did not shine in all its holiness in these circles; carefully defined doctrinal positions or a mystical hypersensitivity, rather than Holy Scripture, became the touchstone for determining who did or did not belong. The evil resided in the very process of this assessment. “The Lord knows those who are his” and “Let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity” [2 Tim 2:19] are the two selection criteria engraved by God himself on the foundation. All too often these two rules were replaced by a standard that people themselves had established for determining who did or did not belong to “those who are his.” A sharp line regarding “departing from iniquity” was drawn based on people’s views on worldly amusements, Sabbath observance, and the like, while on the other hand a great amount of latitude was shown for matters pertaining to character, lifestyle, behavior, and general disposition. Details of doctrine or degrees of emotional rapture were established as norms in place of the measure that Christ had established, and the people whose sense of “the people of the Lord” was shaped by these erroneous yardsticks ran the risk of drawing the dividing line where it should not have been drawn.

All the same, the misuse of this notion, which we condemn without qualification, does not take anything away from its proper use. If in Revelation [21:3] it says even of the new paradise that the blessed “will be his people”; if Peter speaks of those who once “were not a people, but now you are God’s people” [1 Pet 2:10]; if we read that it is better “to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin” [Heb 11:25]; if we observe that Christ came “to make propitiation for the

sins of the people” [Heb 2:17], and that “there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God” [Heb 4:9]; if Paul writes to Titus that Christ came “to purify for himself a people for his own possession” [Titus 2:14]; that Paul in his letter to the church at Corinth cites God saying: “I will be their God, and they shall be my people” [2 Cor 6:16]; and that God says that “Those who were not my people I will call ‘my people’” [Rom 9:25; Hos 2:23]; if Jesus himself testifies that the vineyard will be “given to a people producing its fruits” [Matt 21:43]; and if his coming is announced as being intended “to make ready for the Lord a people prepared” [Luke 1:17]—then, with these clear statements from Scripture before one’s eyes, one can hardly discard the notion of the people of the Lord.

There is no reason to deny that Old Testament usage played a role here. All the same, in this context it must first of all be pointed out that already in the Old Testament itself, the concept of a “people of the Lord” was time and again disconnected from the people of Israel. The words *Lo-Ammi* (“you are not my people”) and *Ammi* (“you are my people”) [Hos 1:9; 2:1] clearly prophesied that the people of the Lord were not simply restricted to Israel. The people who “offer themselves freely” (Psa 110:3) are not only from the nation of Israel. And even before Jesus began his ministry, John the Baptist had already declared that God could “raise up children for Abraham” from the stones of the wilderness [Matt 3:9]. That is why [the Scriptures] constantly go from Moses back to Abraham and witness directly that there is a *twofold* Israel (that is, the Israel according to the flesh, and the Israel according to the spirit), and that the true Israel is not formed by the Jews, but rather by those who have been redeemed by the Lord.

In the second place, we add that it was not by human invention, but by the direct ordination of God that the revelation of the Old Testament was bound to a people, to have it expressed in a national form, and so to express what is to come not as a group, an isolated circle, a brotherhood, but decidedly as a people. As a result, the idea of a people of the Lord arose already at the very beginning, and was maintained throughout the New Testament. It is not a side issue, but an essential component of revelation.

As such, it is a matter of indifference whether we use the notion of *congregation* instead of *the people of the Lord*. The concept of *congregation* did not first arise in the New Testament after the downfall of Israel as a nation state, but already appears repeatedly in the Old Testament as applied to Israel.

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In Hebrew, the Old Testament congregation is called the *qāhāl*, which means “a gathering of people,” and this term *qāhāl* or “assembly” is used to refer to the people in the context of their religious character. Accordingly, [the Scriptures] call the sacrifice that is made for the entire people a “sin offering for the assembly” (Lev 4:21). Similarly, when Moses addresses the people, he says: “For the assembly, there shall be one statute for you” (Num 15:15). Just before the water sprang from the rock, it says: “Then Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock” (Num 20:10). Moses likewise witnesses in Deuteronomy 5:22: “These words the LORD spoke to all your assembly.” Psalm 22:22 says: “. . . in the midst of the congregation I will praise you,” and a little later: “From you comes my praise in the great congregation.” In Joel [2:16] the priests are told to “gather the people, consecrate the congregation,” without there appearing to be any principal difference in the extent or meaning of the words *people* and *congregation*. In just the same way, the terms *congregation* and *people* already appear in the time when Israel did not yet have an earthly king. Yahweh was the theocratic King over Israel, and it was in order to point to this very circumstance that the word *congregation* or *qāhāl* received its own particular shade of meaning. But whether Scripture speaks of Israel as congregation, of Israel as people, or of Israel as the flock and the sheep of his pasture, it always came down to what the psalmist sang: “For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand” [Psa 95:7]. Yahweh was the King over his people; he was the Lawgiver, the Judge of his people, the Shepherd who made his sheep lie down in green pastures [see Psa 23:1-2].

In the New Testament, the concept of *qāhāl* or *congregation* is most often applied to an assembly of the people of God in one specific place, and is only sparingly used to refer to the people of the Lord as they are dispersed abroad. In the past, the congregation of Israel only gathered in the general national assembly, but synagogues later were added in several places as well. The word *synagōgē* means the same thing as *qāhāl*—that is, the gathering of the people, and it was in following this usage that the name *congregation* was transferred to local groups of Christians. In fact, they took the very same word that had been used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament for the Hebrew word for congregation: this word (*ekklēsia*) can still be recognized in the French *église*. But whenever the New Testament seeks to emphasize not the local gathering of believers

in their assemblies, but rather the unity of all of the Lord's people, it uses either the word *people* or the word *body*.

The *body of Christ* is an organic expression that epitomizes the notion of a people. The nations on earth were often composed of a mixture of different groups of various classes, and the kings who ruled over them were usually men of violence who had achieved their dominion through the power of the sword. This is why the New Testament opted for a more specific expression in order to bring to expression the spiritual, internal bond that unites Christ with his people. Earlier Jesus himself had similarly spoken about the vine and the branches. This image, however, was taken from non-sentient nature. Especially the apostle Paul preferred instead to use an image from sentient creation by speaking of Christ as the head of the body and of believers as members of the body. This image precludes all external associations of dominion and subjection, replacing that with an organic notion. The head is inherently one with the body and rules over it. There is one blood that circulates through head and body. There is one life-spirit that gives life to both head and body. This image was transferred to Christ in his relationship with those whom he has redeemed, in order to express the close life connection between him and his people. But regardless of the image used to refer to this concept—whether that of the shepherd and his flock, of the vine and the branches, of the head and the body, or of the king and his people—it is and remains one and the same concept that comes to expression: those who have been born again are, to use a single expression, united under Christ, who has bought them with his own blood. They are a people for his own possession [1 Pet 2:9], and those who belong to this people confess that they belong to Jesus Christ and find in him their only comfort both in life and in death.

Although Scripture uses these different images, we are not free to interchange the terms. When you speak of the sheep of his pasture, the corresponding image is that of the shepherd. If you speak of the body, the corresponding image is that of the head. Similarly, when you speak of Christ as King, the corresponding image is that of the people. It makes no sense to speak of the king of the flock, or of the king of the body. Those who speak of the king must connect that word to the notion of his subjects or people. In fact, not even the concept of *congregation* fits. Since Christ in Scripture is given the name and honorific title of King as an indication of his office, and given that it is testified of him that “he must reign [as King]

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until he has put all his enemies under his feet” [1 Cor 15:25], the church has correctly concluded that we must place his kingship in the foreground, and that we must honor Christ as our greatest Prophet and Teacher who reveals the truth to us, as our only High Priest who saves us and prays for us, and, in the third place, as our eternal King who rules over us and preserves us in the redemption obtained for us.¹

For that reason we do not speak of Christ as our Prophet, our High Priest, our Head, or our Shepherd; instead, everywhere and in every one of its creeds, the church of Christ has always confessed him to be our Prophet, Priest, and *King*. However, what follows from this confession is that we must also think of all believers, the multitude of those throughout the world who have been elected and are born again, above all in terms of his *people*. The image of a king is completed only by that of the people. Therefore, those who err by resisting and opposing specifically the notion of the people of the Lord, are consistent in that they seek to demote Christ’s kingship over us. They admit that he is our Teacher and Prophet who reveals God’s counsel to us, and our High Priest who has rendered his sacrifice for us, redeems us, reconciles us with God, and prays for us. However, they do not admit what is in fact the pinnacle, namely, that Christ is our King who governs us and to whom we are subjected. They may admit that he is king in an ideal, spiritual sense, just like we speak of “the prince of poets,” but they insist that he is not our King in the sense that we as his subjects owe him honor and obedience, and if need be even sacrifice our life to him.

From this it necessarily follows that, wherever we in these pages purposefully return Christ’s kingship to its proper place in the foreground and attempt to restore it to its full luster among us, we may never separate it for even a single moment from the concept of the people of the Lord. The concept of the King cannot be honored apart from the parallel concept of his people. For us, a congregation has become a local concept and points to a locally instituted church, and you cannot ascend from it to arrive at the kingship of Christ. If the concept of *church* is understood ideally, it can indeed function as a synonym for *people*. To this degree it is possible to speak also of Christ as the King of his church. All the same, the proper word that expresses our relationship to Christ our King is that of either his subjects or his people. Also the words *servant* or *soldier*, both

1. This formulation derives from Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 12, Q&A 31.

of which likewise appear in Scripture, may be used, but only *people* and *subjects* point directly to the King. *Servant*, after all, corresponds to the name *Lord*, while the word *soldier* has a specific application in that it pertains to the battle that the church must wage. But if you want to express our relationship to Christ as our King, as a concept that expresses at one and the same time all the obligations that we have toward him, you have to remember that the King rules over his subjects and has dominion over his people.

Although Scripture does speak of us being subject to him and of subjection, but does not as such use the word *subject*, our preference ought in the end to be for the word *people*. The term *subject* belongs more properly to earthly kings, who often obtain their right of dominion by overpowering others, and belongs less properly to Christ, who obtained his kingship by dying for his people. This is why the expression *people of the Lord* ought to be preferred by us. It is biblical, it expresses the gathering of all believers, and it does not view these believers in terms of their individuality. The people and their King belong together. And being the people of the Lord implies all kinds of obligations on our part toward our King.