

SERIES IV

CHRIST'S
KINGSHIP AND
SOCIETY

AN INDEPENDENT SPHERE

You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden.

MATTHEW 5:14

When we discuss Christ's kingship, we cannot pass directly from the family to the state. Between them lies what is usually called social life, and it has become very important especially in our days to give as clear as possible an account of what Jesus' kingship means for society. It cannot be denied that in the previous century, as well as in the present one, social issues have increasingly attracted the attention of many. In this context, the word "social" should not be misconstrued as referring exclusively to the relationship between labor and capital. Instead we must insist that this relationship is just one of the many strands in the rich cord that holds social life together, and that the concept "social" includes everything, whatever it is called or looks like, that goes beyond the borders of the family, is not bound within the stays of the state, and still forms an integral part of the life of the world. Family, society, and state are indeed three independent factors in human life, to which is added the church as a fourth and extra factor. The first three are of creation, and to them the church was added as a fourth factor arising from the domain of grace, because of sin.

§ 1

If we leave the church, which we treated separately above, to the side, and restrict ourselves here to what arises inevitably as a necessary part of our human life by virtue of creation—regardless of the presence or absence of sin—human life begins with the family, and finds in it its first original organization. Then it aims at a permanent, comprehensive organization in the kingdom or state, by virtue of the power of the law. But then between the family and the state lies the social organization of our human life, which we may simply refer to as the life of the world. This final factor of social life tends in general to be the last of the three to develop fully. The family is always there in and of itself, and usually, where multiple families live together, a certain form of governmental authority soon develops in a patriarchal, despotic, or more open fashion. But the organization of social life, which is wedged between them, has on the whole been very slow to develop. Among the tribes in Africa there is even now no social development to speak of in a comprehensive sense. Among the people of antiquity social life remained at a very low pitch, and even during the Middle Ages and after the Reformation there was hardly a hint of the heights that society has attained in our day. A variety of reasons contributed to society's incredible growth especially in the nineteenth century, and this in turn helps to explain why there is currently a growing interest in nearly every question that pertains to the development of society and social life.

It cannot be denied that as these social issues came to occupy center stage, both family and state were put under pressure. Society now wants to lay down the law for the family and state as well. It ultimately wants to conquer all of human life and subject it to itself. The call for liberty and freedom is starting to mean more and more that neither the bond of the family nor the bond of the state ought to hinder the world in any way in its entirely open social development. Anarchy is the goal toward which this overpowering development of social life is heading. All bonds must be broken. People should be allowed to live according to the dictates of their nature. And this free natural life is to celebrate its triumphs in the uninhibited development of our lives—not in the family, nor in the state, but in society. If you eliminate the family and the state, so it is said, society will organize itself, and only in that free and independent social organization of human life will humanity be able to develop in such a way as to obtain the greatest happiness.

We hear this cry especially among the nihilists, anarchists, and socialists, but it can actually be heard throughout the modern world. The result

is that family and state are being threatened in their existence more and more. That is why it is so important for us also as Christians to give a clear account of the limits within which social life is to remain. We too must work to promote and facilitate the development and organization of society, but we may never allow its aspirations to infringe on the family or to undermine the authority of the state. Accordingly, it goes without saying that we cannot be content to highlight merely the importance of Christ's kingship for the family and the state, but must also inquire into what the significance of his kingship ought to be for social life.

The life of the world comes to expression above all in society. What Scripture calls "the world" also penetrates the heart, causes turmoil in the family, and attempts to overpower the state, and yet it is especially in society that the world attempts to erect its throne. Whoever talks about the life of the world refers in the first place to the development of our human life as it is established in a free society. The word "world" can also be understood in many other ways; that is true in Scripture as well. But wherever we encounter in Scripture the contrast between the world and Christ's kingdom, the "world" refers to a dangerous spirit that prevails and that leads human life as it freely discloses itself. Through its fixed structure, the family is as a matter of course accompanied by rules governing family life. And just like the family, so too the state obtains a fixed structure and fixed rules through its laws. But society does not have such a fixed organization or structure; fixed rules and laws are lacking here. And that is why the spirit that seeks to corrupt our life turns to society as its first object, attempts to bring it to its knees, and tries to establish its rule over it.

§ 2

What that unholy spirit meets is an empty terrain. Imperceptibly it enters what we call "public opinion," which is actually nothing but the perspective and viewpoint that manages to set the tone for social life in every one of its aspects. It is the world understood in this sense that Christ opposes with his kingdom. His very goal is to drive the spirit of the world out of our world, and to give our world the life of his spirit instead. It is the Holy Spirit who goes to battle against the unholy spirit of the world with that end in view. Even before Jesus went to Gethsemane, he announced to his disciples: "Take heart; I have overcome the world" [John 16:33]. Of course, this was not actually true; when Jesus died on the cross, the world remained what it was. Therefore, Jesus could only have meant that he had overcome the world in principle, and that the battle he had launched against the world would bring about its total downfall and destruction in the end. But this

is why the battle against the world had to be continued after he ascended into heaven, making the rest of the history of God's kingdom nothing but an endless struggle between the Spirit of Christ and the spirit of the world.

For that reason, it simply cannot be true that Jesus as our King concerns himself with his church alone, and leaves society to its own lot. Rather, the battle against the world only began for real after Jesus ascended into heaven. As King, Christ will fight for this kingdom in his church and in the family, but he will no less fight for his kingdom on the terrain of social life.

The fact of the matter is that you will not understand the struggle of Christ our King, to subject his enemies under his feet over the centuries, if you remove human society from his kingship. We admit, of course, that the power with which Christ seeks to rule society as well is often exercised by virtue of his influence on individual hearts, on the family, and on his church; and yet, this power is not enough. Social life forms a terrain of its own, and it too is a terrain that Christ enters with his kingly majesty in order to rule it. This is extremely important for us as Christians because we too live in society and are our King's fellow warriors and soldiers. It was with a view to this that Jesus told his disciples: "A city set on a hill cannot be hidden" [Matt 5:14].

Our King does indeed work directly on society, without our input, but it cannot be denied that he similarly exercises his kingly dominion through us—and this is something we also need to acknowledge with a view to our life in society. Jesus did not pray that the Father might take us out of the world. Our destiny as Christians was not to withdraw as an isolated group from the world and into the desert. Jesus only prayed that the Father would keep us in the world [see John 17:15]. Our place, therefore, is in society, and we must occupy this place honorably. Every sect that has ever attempted to withdraw from society and live for Jesus outside it discovered that, in the end, it drifted away from its King. But because this is so, we may never allow ourselves to think that when we enter society we are actually leaving our King, and that we need to flee to the church in order to find him back again.

Christ's kingship extends over all things, extends to every part of human life, also in society. Only when we recognize and honor the fact that Christ's kingly dominion extends also over society can we stand strong in it. It goes without saying that this is the most difficult part of our service to our King. Our service to Jesus as our King is much easier in church and family, and even in the state. There we find paths that have already been trodden, and

we can follow them with calm and steady feet. In fact, we may even feel that we are at home on all three of these terrains. But in society we live in the midst of opposition, and have to stand on our own two feet, while people raise innumerable hindrances and dig all kinds of pitfalls for us. This makes it altogether understandable that so many prefer to shun the world and hazard onto that slippery terrain as little as possible. But for the greatest majority of people it is impossible to do so. Their position in life, their work, or their office constantly demands of them that they engage the world. As a rule, we are called to participate in all of society, and this is why it is simply imperative for us to believe that Christ's kingly dominion extends to society as well. Only those who enter society with their King can personally overcome the world in his power.

Another factor that does not tolerate the exclusion of social life from Christ's kingship is the very nature of that kingship. Such an exclusion might have been imaginable had this kingship been merely temporal and instituted for a specific purpose. But this is not the case. Christ's kingship is directed to the last catastrophe when, at the final judgment, the world and its dominion will fall, and the kingdom of glory shall come in. And of course, in the reversal that will then take place, everything will be included—all of nature, all creatures that move on earth, and, above all, human life (including the past generations that already entered the grave hundreds of years ago, the current generation to which we ourselves belong, and the generations of those who will come after us).

§ 3

The goal of Jesus' kingship is that final judgment, that final outcome. He is not a King who rules to maintain law and order, and for the rest has no interest in the way his people live. The nature of his kingship is altogether different. While every earthly kingship aims to maintain the existing order, and every king is glad if he manages to leave his land and people to his successor in a state of flourishing and stability, in the case of Christ his kingship is one that seeks to do battle, that launches a fundamental assault on the existing order, and that seeks to put an end once and for all to the entire existing order and to usher in a totally new state of affairs. The goal toward which everything is directed is for Christ to hand the kingship over to God and the Father, and for a situation to be created where God will be all and in all [see 1 Cor 15:24-28]. Yet this will not be accomplished along the road of violence. If that were the case, the many centuries of preparation would have been unnecessary, and the world could just as well have ended soon after Pentecost already. But this was not how God would have things happen.

By now the struggle in the spirit world has been raging for some two thousand years. It is no aimless repetition of just one life from one century into the next. If that were the case, life would have no purpose. Accordingly, it is worth noting that history indeed shows us that new situations have arisen over the course of the centuries, that a higher and more versatile development was achieved, and that life's great questions have constantly presented themselves to us in new forms. What this means is that the spirit of the world has constantly renewed its attack on the kingdom of Christ, that it always persists in its resistance to the Spirit of Christ, and that it announces again and again that the world does not need Christ, claiming that the world is capable in every way to overcome its misery and to usher in that state of happiness. Yet history will also show us that this attempt meets with constant failure, and that throughout the centuries the *Evangelium sempiternum* (the eternal gospel), wherever it holds sway, really does continue to bring peace and happiness. So, in one century Christ awaits those attacks and vain attempts, or waits for the century thereafter, in order to triumph in the fact that these attacks never amount to anything and that they are time and again unabashedly futile. And in the meantime, the course of history proves not to be a goalless one, because as a result of it a higher development constantly establishes itself in human life, new powers are unleashed in it, and human life is enriched by the plurality of available means and by the intensity of what is materially and spiritually expressed.

This will continue until the spirit of the world has spent the last of its energy and no longer has anything with which to oppose Christ. Then the spirit of the world will have to resort to ruses and violence. Then it will become embodied in the antichrist so as to make short work of anything and everything that bears the mark of baptism. Then it will seek to root out the Christian faith. But then it will also become clear that the eternal gospel has stood firm against every higher development of the world, that it has successfully resisted every spiritual attack, that it has withstood the test until the end, and that it now shines in the fullness of its divine perfection. And when the world in its anguish finally sets power over against power, and in an act of desperation turns to violence against Christ, then the end will come, and the power of Christ our King will so immeasurably surpass the world's power that it will sink into nothingness and Christ will destroy it with the breath of his mouth.

But if the nature of Christ's kingship is as we have just described it above, how could this kingship ever be limited to the church, the family, or the state, and fail to extend to society as well? Or do we need further arguments to prove that the favorite target of the spirit of the world is social life, so that it may lay its siege, renew its attack on the kingdom of Christ, and oppose Christ's power with its own power? This is why the statements Holy Scripture makes about the kingship are so comprehensive: he has been given all authority on earth and in heaven [see Matt 28:18]; all things are subject to him [see 1 Cor 15:27]. There are no exceptions. So why, then, would you want to exclude from his kingship that wide terrain of our human existence, where the greatest struggle between the spirit of the world and the Spirit of Christ in fact takes place? If you remove Christ's power over society from his kingship, his kingship will fall apart.

The same is true of our faith in this kingship. You could not properly conceive of this kingship if you were to believe that your King did have a kingly power to exert in his church, in your family, and (in part) in the state, but that you are not under his kingship once you enter society. Sadly, that is how many Christians indeed conceive of things. Furthermore, the lamentable result is that they may pray as priests in church, exercise their piety in their family, and oblige in state matters, but for the rest allow themselves to be swept along by the current of social life as if that part of their lives were unrelated to Christ's kingship. In society they do still honor the demands made on their conscience from above. They feel that they are still responsible personally; and yet, they do not feel that the scepter of Jesus' kingship extends also over this wide terrain of life. They do not know that all the turmoil in the world is directed against their King, and they fail to see that their King is active also on this terrain in order to strengthen his people and to bring his spirit to power. The result is, therefore, that Christ's kingship is not alive for them. They may still confess it as a doctrine, but fail to experience it in their lives. The pivotal statement of their Savior that all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to him [see Matt 28:18] is meaningless to them.

§ 4

But those who broke with their superficiality and recognized their calling to take Christ's kingship seriously again felt the need to honor it in every way, to honor it on every terrain, and to honor and recognize it above all on that wide terrain where the largest part of our human existence is played out. And for by far the greatest amount of people this wide terrain is the

terrain of society. For women this may be less true than it is for men; but of course, it is also men who are much more active in leading the spirit of the world. Moreover, the women who do participate in this wide social terrain do not do so insofar as they belong to the family but as members of society.

If Christ's kingship is going to form an unbroken whole that truly guides and leads us along every path, then we undoubtedly also need to open our eyes to the work that his kingship performs in the sphere of society. Every exception that we allowed would break the whole for us. We would at most take refuge in God's rule over the course of history and over the direction of our lives, and add Christ only insofar as this pertains to the salvation of our soul, but would no longer understand anything of Christ's kingship outside the church. Our life would pass outside the giant struggle that is being fought between the Spirit of Christ and the spirit of the world. The salvation of our soul would be something separate, set apart from life. Our personal existence would be lifted out of what the Lord God is doing through Christ for our entire human race. We would be torn out of life in its interconnectedness, and the great reversal to occur in the last days would be something that goes on outside us and would concern us at the very most as interested spectators. Therefore, rather than leaving Christ's kingship over society as an incidental aspect that may be left aside if needed, we should greatly emphasize that the struggle between the spirit of the world and the Spirit of Christ is being fought out especially on this terrain; that those who confess Christ as King fall short in the execution of their duty if they do not go to war with the full armor of the gospel also, and especially, on that terrain; and that those who do not see how significant the battle fought on this terrain is will be weakened in their faith.

God reigns, and indeed it would be altogether godless to reduce the holy God to an idle King, a *roi fainéant*, for the sake of Christ's kingship. There is not a single operation of Christ's kingship in which God is not working, because Father and Son are one. But in the dispensation of sin as it will continue until the final day, our holy God rules instrumentally through the one in whom atonement is found. Here too it is and remains: from God, and through God, and to God are all things [see Rom 11:36]. But until sin has been abolished, no kingly dominion of atonement is even imaginable for us except through Christ, who is God himself, worthy to be worshiped into all eternity.

IV.2

FROM CREATION

You shall not worship the LORD your God in that way.

DEUTERONOMY 12:4

The word “society” [*maatschappij*] is an unfortunate word. Nowhere did the translators of our Dutch Authorized Version use this word in their translation of Holy Scripture,¹ and even now it is a bookish word that we find in theoretical treatises but that hardly ever occurs in normal conversation. We do hear of specific societies, such as the Railway Society, the Commerce Society, or the Society for the Common Good, but the word “society” is not commonly used to refer to society writ large, encompassing all human life apart from church, family, and state. The word the Germans chose (*Gesellschaft*) has a much warmer sound to it. In Dutch we might similarly have spoken about “a *gezelschap* of the people” or “human *gezelschap*,” but at the time when Dutch was being consolidated as a language, there was little influence from Germany and a good deal more from France. This is why the French word *société* was literally translated into Dutch as *maatschappij*. Initially, people preferred simply to leave such French words untranslated, and spoke of a “company” [*compagnie*] or “society” [*societeit*], as when the

§ 1

1. The *Statenvertaling* (1618/1637) was the first Dutch translation of the Bible from the original languages, and became the culturally unifying basis for the accepted form of standardized Dutch.