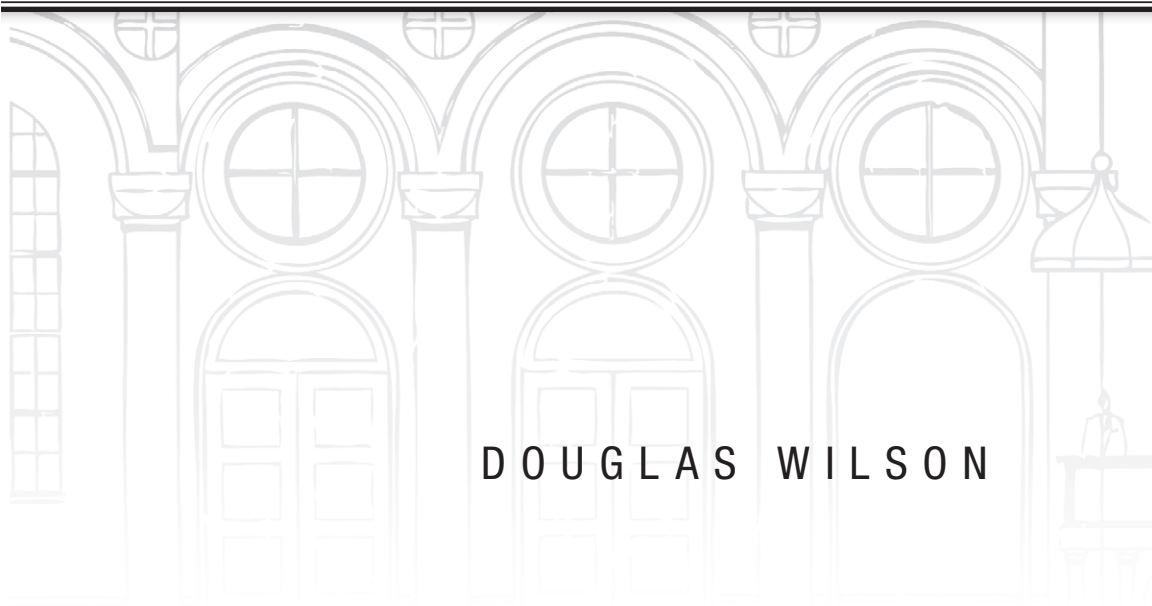


MOTHER KIRK

Essays on Church Life



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canonpress
Moscow, Idaho 

Published by Canon Press
P.O. Box 8729, Moscow, ID 83843
800.488.2034 | www.canonpress.com

Douglas Wilson, *Mother Kirk: Essays on Church Life*
Copyright © 2001 by Canon Press.
Cover design by Rachel Hoffmann.
ISBN-13: 978-1-885767-72-1
ISBN-10: 1-885767-72-2

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Wilson, Douglas
Mother kirk : essays on church life / Douglas Wilson.
p.cm.
Includes index.
ISBN 1-885767-72-2 (pbk.)
1. Church. I. Title.
BV600.2 .W565 2001
262—dc21

00-010090

08 09 10 11 12 13 14 15 10 9 8 7 6 5 4

For my mother,
Elizabeth Catherine Dodds Wilson,
who prayed with me when I first called
on the Lord, and who throughout my
life has faithfully modeled for me
what it means to be the Church.

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FOREWORD

Reformed theology, especially in its late twentieth-century American variety, emphasizes the comprehensiveness of Christian faith. The notion that Christianity offers a worldview embracing every area of life has never been more explicitly affirmed or more elaborately detailed. Related to this is the claim that every calling is good and noble, that all work can be devoted to the service of Christ, that all Christians are called to seek first the kingdom of God.

This good and necessary emphasis is often accompanied, however, by a corresponding denigration of pastoral ministry: All Christians, it is said, have a “full-time” ministry, so the pastor has no higher a calling than the plumber or homemaker. But this corollary does not follow. Though all callings can be equally devoted to Christ’s service, not all callings are equal. And Reformed Christians have always recognized that the pastoral office is the highest office not only of the church but in the world.

It is the highest calling in part because it is the broadest calling, a vocation to minister to everyone in every circumstance. Sicknes strikes, and the doctor is called. Sued or indicted, I contact a lawyer. Fired from my job, I may apply with a placement agency. When labor pains begin, we call a midwife or a doctor, and when we have breathed our last, the undertaker has his say. For each stage of life, for each crisis, we have our specialist.

The pastor is no specialist. His field of activity embraces every known profession: The ideal pastor would combine the dialectical skills of the best attorney, the bedside manner of the most compassionate physician, the rhetorical passion of politicians from ages past, and a breadth of scholarship that befits a student and teacher of the Creator’s book.

The pastor is no specialist. He is called to represent Christ in every kind of situation of need or pain. He anoints and prays with the child

suffering from leukemia, rebukes and guides the adulterer in the way of repentance, offers counsel and encouragement to the entrepreneur whose business has folded, rejoices with new parents and mourns with those bereft of friends and family. Beside the doctor, beside the financial consultant, beside the nursing home attendant, stands the pastor. In the maternity ward, in the jail cell, in the home tense with marital strife, stands the pastor. At the baptism, at the wedding reception, at the funeral, stands the pastor. He is a generalist in human crisis, a generalist in moments of passage, a generalist confronted with all of the infinite varieties of human suffering.

There is a sense in which the pastor is a specialist. For every situation, he has essentially one word, the word of the gospel of Jesus. Among the sick, the pastor's concern is not only for healing but to indicate how suffering can be transformed into joyful witness. Among the poor, the pastor's concern is not just how to pay next month's bills, but to consider how poverty may strengthen faith in the goodness of the heavenly Father. At the bedside of the dying, the pastor's concern is not just to ease pain but to hold forth the promise of resurrection life.

Mother Kirk can be read with profit by all Christians, but at its heart this book is an instruction manual for pastors and elders, and it breathes the kind of wisdom that emerges only from long pastoral experience experienced through diligent study of Scripture. *Mother Kirk* is written by a pastor who knows that pastoral work demands courage, determination, gentleness, vision, patience, self-restraint, insight, shrewdness, and, above all, faith working through love. It is written by a pastor who sees that pastoral ministry is man's work. Today, many avoid pastoral vocation because they think it beneath them. *Mother Kirk* will deter for exactly the opposite reason.

Mother Kirk highlights the importance of teaching and preaching as the center of pastoral ministry. That is hardly surprising, since this book comes from a classical Calvinist. Some Calvinists, however, leave the impression that the church would function much more smoothly if it were not for the people. Doug Wilson is not that sort of Calvinist. He understands that the church is people, and that people can be governed and led only by other people. He realizes that the ministry of the Word must be incarnated in the life of the pastor. He has observed that the biblical qualifications for elders focus on character. He knows there are no paper pastors.

Perhaps the most impressive thing about this book, and certainly one of the most impressive things about Doug Wilson's own very impressive

ministry, is his realization that Jesus is the Head and Lord of His Church. Every Christian would agree, but few have grasped as profoundly as Wilson the flip side of this confession: If Jesus is the Head of His Church, that means I'm not and you're not. And that means that there is no place in the church's leadership for the domineering benefactor, the manipulative wheeler-dealer, the prima donna, the agenda-monger. There is room only for those willing to become servants to all, those willing to lay down their lives for (sometimes intractable) sheep, for those willing to bear the slave yoke of Christ with humility, grace, and gladness. Only such leaders will bring genuine reformation, because only such leaders labor in faith, confessing that the future of Mother Kirk is in the Lord's hands and not their own.

Peter J. Leithart
Feast of St. Lawrence, 2000
Peniel Hall



INTRODUCTION

A Manifesto on What Matters

Our culture is haunted by epistemological despair, a despair which cannot be buried, shouted down, turned aside, or simply ignored. It is always there, even when we may prefer to deny it. We have no idea why we are here, where we are supposed to go, and how we are to conduct ourselves on the way. But in the meantime, our government schools solemnly teach third graders how to use condoms. Countless fathers desert their wives and children. Pastors dishonor their calling through their rampant adulteries. Thieving representatives of a thieving people plunder the widow. The drunkards of Ephraim puke on the table. For those who have eyes, the approaching night is clearly the kind which cannot be danced away.¹

Why? This has happened because, over the last century and a half, the Christian Church has allowed herself to be corrupted by the various forms of unbelieving *-isms* which surround her—egalitarianism, feminism, socialism, environmentalism, you-name-it-ism. The contemporary Church consequently has no answers for those questioning, no light for those in darkness, no life for those who live in death. The Church, which God ordained as the pillar and ground of the truth, now finds herself echoing (although somewhat plaintively) that ancient relativistic aside of Pilate—*quod veritas?* What is truth?²

In a world of pagan despair, the epistemological corruptions and compromises of the Christian Church have blurred and distorted the clarity of the biblical message. And as circumstances continue to

¹ Capable critiques of the reasons for this are not lacking. See John Armstrong, *The Coming Evangelical Crisis* (Chicago: Moody, 1996).

² Some who ask this question do not care for the answer. For those who do care, consult David Wells, *No Place for Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), David Wells, *God in the Wasteland* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), and David Wells, *Losing Our Virtue* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

deteriorate, the silent presence of a bystanding, impotent Church has merely added to the weight and burden of our cultural despair.

To the extent that the symptoms of our disease are undeniable, the world does offer some suggestions. A common method solves the problem by admitting that it exists, but it is not that serious. As soon as the false prophets and liars see that God's people are on the verge of a deep and real repentance, they will not be long in coming forward. And when they come forward they will heal the wound of the people lightly; they will speak peace when there is no peace. They will do nothing more than take a damp washcloth and dab around the edges of our gangrenous wound. But there will be no peace. Until we see that God is true, though every man be a liar, we will not have any peace worthy of the name.

Christians must obediently and humbly return to the triune God of Scripture. We must return to a fear of the Lord, which is the beginning of all true wisdom. This must be our epistemology, our apologetic, our hermeneutic—thorough-going obedience to the grace of God through Christ in the fear of God. This, and only this, will enable us to become like the men of Issachar, who understood the times and knew what Israel should do. Therefore, the Lord, not man, must control the transformation of culture.³

By the grace of the Lord, we must resolve to be faithful to every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. From Genesis to Revelation, we must not be embarrassed by any passage of Scripture, and once we have submissively ascertained its meaning through careful and patient grammatical, historical and typological study, we must seek to put it into practice the day before yesterday.

The reformation of the Church begins with individuals. It will be as individuals that we will appear before the bar of God to be gathered with the sheep, or scattered with the goats. Individuals will give an account for all their idle words, lustful and covetous thoughts, squandered talents, and now vain excuses. Individuals will enter into the blessed rest or be banished to the outer darkness.

All who name the name of Christ must therefore depart from all forms of wickedness, especially the secret sin which has been hidden from every eye but God's. Individual Christians must repent of the sin of autonomous individualism, the belief that our lives and thoughts are our own property and that our relationships with others are simply a

³The first step in this is the toppling of modernity's household gods. For some insight on who *they* are, see Herbert Schlossberg, *Idols for Destruction* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1983).

matter of our own voluntary arrangements. As the Lord lives, they are not. We have been bought with a price; we are not our own. Having been redeemed by Christ, we have been placed by God under various governments to obey Him through faithful service according to the law He has established for the governance of these institutions.

So the reformation of the family is at the heart of the reformation of the Church. All Christians concerned for the Church must recognize the importance of structuring the family according to the Scriptures and not according to the smoke of this world. The husband is established by God as the head of the wife, just as Christ is the head of the Church. This position is not to be abused through petty tyrannies; husbands must diligently imitate the self-sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ. Christian husbands must repent of their countless attempts to ignore this truth, their abdications, their compromises with the lies and liars of feminism, their lack of spiritual leadership, and their adulteries.⁴ Godly wives are to delight in their husbands and in their children.⁵ There is no shame in managing a household well, and a great deal of shame in deserting it. Children are to honor their parents in the Lord; it is the right thing to do.⁶

In a godly culture, the first social manifestation of grace is found in the family. But our culture is so rebellious that we have institutionalized our rebellion and cannot even conceive of how a genuine obedience would appear. We must nevertheless begin; Christians must insist on the abolition of the government school system, our nursing home system, our government welfare system, and countless other agencies and bureaucracies designed by the godless to replace the family. The family, and only the family, is the ministry of health, education, and welfare. Christians must hasten the destruction of this godless system of salvation by works through separating themselves from it. Christians must take their children out of government schools and day-care centers, their parents out of rest homes, and food stamps out of the budget.⁷

And this brings us to the point of this book, which is the reformation of the Church. The first duty of all Christian churches is to proclaim clearly the gospel of Christ as Scripture has revealed it to us. Our preachers must

⁴ Of course, we will do our best to keep incestuous footnotes to a minimum. But please see Douglas Wilson, *Reforming Marriage* (Moscow: Canon Press, 1995).

⁵ Nancy Wilson, *The Fruit of Her Hands* (Moscow: Canon Press, 1997), and *Praise Her in the Gates* (Moscow: Canon Press, 2000).

⁶ Douglas Wilson, *Standing on the Promises* (Moscow: Canon Press, 1997).

⁷ James Burnham, *Suicide of the West* (Chicago: Regnery Books, 1985).

therefore repent of their ignorance, slothfulness, timidity, and prideful “wiser than God” assumptions, and return to a bold proclamation of the truth of the gospel. We need have no fear in preaching this message, for it abases man and exalts Christ. We need to tremble for having neglected it.

This message is that man by nature is a deserving object of God’s wrath, utterly without hope of saving himself. Dead in his filthiness, he is without God and without hope in the world. But before all worlds, God the Father selected by name a people to be called by His name, the number of whom cannot be increased, diminished, or counted by man. When the appointed time for their redemption came, God the Son took on human flesh and was born of a woman. According to the predetermined plan of God, the eternal Word of God died on a tree as a perfect and efficacious substitute for His people, those whom the Father had given Him. As the message of this gospel progresses throughout the world, God the Spirit comes upon the men and women selected for salvation and in a wonderful and effectual way, regenerates them; those whom God has ordained to eternal life believe. This being the case, what shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? No true child of God will ever fall from the everlasting arms.⁸

The message of this gospel is clear in Scripture. We must confess that our sinful neglect of the Bible has blurred it for us. As the Church returns to a clear understanding of the gospel message, other important doctrinal reformations will follow.

The point of this book is the reformation of the Church, and not the reformation of nations and cultures. Nevertheless, if the Church *were* to be reformed, it would have a dramatic impact on the surrounding nations and cultures.

The state is the third institution in shambles. At the very beginning of the coming cultural reformation, our civil magistrates must repent of their blasphemous delusion that the civil government is in any way competent to be a savior for man. This blasphemy is ours, for our magistrates represent us to God in the civil realm. Through them, we have sinned in rejecting the biblical doctrine of God’s predestination. Not surprisingly, unbelieving man seeks to fill the void of what he calls “chance” with his own form of total and absolute control—bureaucratic predestination by man. The result is an all-encompassing totalitarian state at war with the

⁸ David Hagopian, *Back to Basics* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1996), 6–64.

living God. But our God is a God of battles and such teapot rebellions never last very long; the Lord in heaven laughs.⁹

God requires the magistrate simply to be a deacon of justice, to punish the wrongdoer with the sword. The duty of the magistrate is to make it possible to walk across town safely in the middle of the night. Generalizing somewhat, this is the extent of their responsibility. But because they have attempted to usurp the position and prerogatives of the sovereign God in salvation, they have been too overwhelmed and distracted to do the one thing God requires of them.

All Christians must repent of this, for we have been content to have them represent us by such blasphemous folly. The taxes we currently pay and the persecutions we currently experience are a just chastisement for our disobedience. As unbelieving civil magistrates preen themselves on their omnicompetence, our response must not be rebellion or anger. We live under a civil government which is better than we deserve. Our response must be patience in our suffering; we are responsible for what we receive. If the rod is for the back of fools, we must not complain when God administers the beating. We may confess our sins with patience because we know that when the chastisement is done, God will rise up and use His purified Church to scatter His enemies.

So here is the task before us. The Christian faith calls us to nothing short of world conquest. In order to be faithful to our Lord's great command, we need to take seriously the task of world evangelization. The need is great. But before we send missionaries across land and sea, we must take care that we send out the gospel and not our own sins and follies. Part of our need is to see modernity for the cul-de-sac it is.¹⁰

So our great need is a second Reformation. We must recover the teaching of Scripture and know it to be the teaching of Scripture. Related to this, our second need is spiritual renewal. Without the power of the Spirit anointing it, all the doctrinal reformation in the world will simply be words and more words.¹¹ And the third great need is the evangelization of the world, undertaken by a purified and empowered Church. The Lord God has promised that day, and we must pray that He hastens it.¹²

⁹ For background on this, see C. Gregg Singer, *Theological Interpretation of American History* (Greenville: A Press, 1964) and R.J. Rushdoony, *The Politics of Guilt and Pity* (Fairfax: Thoburn Press, 1970).

¹⁰ Thomas C. Oden, *After Modernity . . . What?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1990). The answer to the question is *not* postmodernity. Gene Edward Veith, *Postmodern Times* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1994).

¹¹ Arturo Azurdia, *Spirit Empowered Preaching* (Ross-shire, Great Britain: Mentor, 1998).

¹² Kenneth Gentry, *He Shall Have Dominion* (Tyler: ICE, 1992).

While a lost world has been wandering blindly in the arrogance of sin, we have taken our ease in Zion, seeking our own pleasure and comfort, rather than seeking first the kingdom of God. And those Christians who have been “activists” have sought to do the work of God in the world according to the words and wisdom of men. Our failure has been as great as our folly. We must confess our impotence.

Jesus warned us about these dangers. “Ye are the salt of the earth: but if the salt have lost his savour, wherewith shall it be salted? it is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men” (Mt. 5:13). And here we are, the trampled Church.

No thoughtful Christian can consider the state of our culture today without considerable grief. The lawless are in power, the innocent suffer, the gullible believe, the taxable pay, the sages are befuddled, and everything gets progressively worse. One political party wants to drive us toward the cliff at seventy miles per hour, and the loyal opposition wants to go fifty. In such a situation, it is perilously easy for Christians (*always* in the back seat) to begin to think that we have an obligation to “get involved,” change our country, turn this thing around, and so on.

And so we do have an obligation—but not in the way most frequently suggested. The humanists who currently run the show believe that politics is our savior. It would be unthinkable for a major political figure to state publicly that some widespread cultural problem (drugs, say) had “no political solution,” and that he, Senator Snoutworst, was therefore going to “do nothing” about it. The ensuing commotion would be a sight to behold, the good senator having blasphemed against the reigning god. For unbelievers, politics provide the only possible answer. The problem is that many of the Christians who have “gotten involved” have assumed that the difference between the believers and unbelievers concerns simply the agenda for action—“what should our leaders do?” But they agree on the fact that there is a political solution. But for Christians who seek to think biblically, the problem is far more fundamental than this.

Any serious attempts at cultural reform, based upon “traditional values,” which precede a reformation and revival in the Church, should be considered by Christians as worthless reforms. As a pretty woman without discretion is like a gold ring in a pig’s snout, so is a reformation of law without a reformation of the people. Our nation has progressed as far as she has in her moral corruptions because the Church has diluted her message and consequently finds the surrounding culture baffling.¹³ She

¹³ A delightful exception is found in Harold O.J. Brown, *The Sensate Culture* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1996). For some fascinating counterpoint from an unbelieving perspective, see Thomas Frank, *Conquest of Cool* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

was appointed as the pillar and ground of the truth, and she has found the task wearisome. Contending for the faith delivered to the saints has become too much of a nuisance, and too likely to bring on controversy. We can't have *that*.

Our civic leaders who have not believed God, and who have plunged our nation into this flood of dissipation, were simply acting according to their unregenerate natures. They are without God and without hope in the world. The only way the unbelieving world can be constrained in its external actions, in a way contrary to that unregenerate nature, is when the Church is *salty*. Christ taught that His followers were the salt of the earth—applied to an ungodly society in the same way salt was applied to perishable meat as a preservative. When salt loses its savor, it does no good for the salt to start blaming the meat. Jesus taught that when salt had come to this point, then the salt was due for trampling. It was good for nothing else.

The central problem in America today is the refusal of the Church to act as salt. Salt is controversial. Salt is troublesome. Salt is a nuisance. Salt is divisive. Salt is too doctrinal and theological. Salt is a pain in the neck. Salt is—well, salty. Why can't we all just love Jesus, whoever He is, and try to provide the folks who wander in with a seeker-friendly atmosphere? In the first place, this is pragmatism and not Christianity. In the second place, pragmatism can be readily condemned out of its own mouth. Pragmatism doesn't work. This means that unless God is merciful to us, we will continue to be trampled. If given, His mercy will be shown through a great reformation in the Church—a theological reformation. Many Christians are praying for revival, but we need to be careful how we pray. The Church today is a lightweight operation, like a stack of balsa wood, soaked in lighter fluid. The consuming fire of the Holy Spirit would therefore not burn for long and would not leave much. We must pray for a doctrinal reformation that will cut and split a lot of hardwood—wood that will burn for a long time.

The Puritans are remembered (rightly) for the political impact they had.¹⁴ Hundreds of years after their time, we still owe many of our civil liberties to their teaching and to the sacrifices they made for the sake of their Lord and ours. But the Puritans got their name not because their first goal was to “purify” the politics of the day, but rather because they wanted to purify the Church. The Church of their day needed it, as does ours. But there should be no confusion on this point; the Churches

¹⁴ Douglas Kelly, *The Emergence of Liberty in the Modern World* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1992).

that need to be reformed are not the liberal and apostate Churches. The greatest need for reformation is with the evangelical church.

Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked: I counsel thee to buy of me gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich; and white raiment, that thou mayest be clothed, and that the shame of thy nakedness do not appear; and anoint thine eyes with eyesalve, that thou mayest see. (Rev. 3:17–18)

Modern evangelicals in our culture have gotten money, power, and influence, and it has been like giving whiskey to a two-year-old. But the need of the hour is theological, not political. The arena is the pulpit and the table, not the legislative chamber.¹⁵ The message is Christ crucified and risen for His chosen sinners and now acknowledged Lord of all. This risen and conquering Christ is the Head of the Church. Before we are equipped to proclaim His lordship to the inhabitants of all the earth, we must live as though we believed it in the Church.

We must therefore study the Scriptures and reform our doctrines and beliefs according to the Scriptures. We must then pray, seeking reformation and doctrinal renewal from the sovereign Lord Who alone can bestow it. When the household of God has been cleansed, according to His Word, we will be qualified to preach the triumph of the Lord Christ to the nations of the world. And there were loud voices in heaven, saying, “The kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ; and he shall reign for ever and ever” (Rev. 11:15).

¹⁵ Peter Leithart, *The Kingdom and the Power* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1993), 107–126.