Chapter 4 - The Kingdom and the Church.

Introduction

Van Ruler states that the church is the first work of the Holy Spirit\(^1\) and therefore it would be logical to deal first with the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, and then ecclesiology. However, it is the intention to show that the doctrine of the Holy Spirit is so closely connected with the theme of ‘anticipation’ that an exception is made, in that first the doctrine of the church will be dealt with and then the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. Secondly, not the whole doctrine of ecclesiology will be dealt with here. This chapter will confine itself to those aspects of ecclesiology that are important for the study of the concept of anticipation, in regard to the kingdom of God, in the works of Van Ruler, although reference will be made to other authors as well. To impose these restrictions - of staying with the doctrine of the Holy Spirit – will not be easy, seeing that in Van Ruler’s theology everything is connected with everything else.

4.1 The Nature of the Church

The WCC Faith and Order paper 198 called ‘The Nature and Mission of the Church, a stage on the way to a common statement’ gives a comprehensive statement on the nature of the church and states – amongst other things – that the church is called into being by God, grounded in the word of God and that the Holy Spirit calls a people who together make the holy, catholic and apostolic church.\(^2\)

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\(^1\) Arnold A Van Ruler, *Ik Geloof; De twaalf artikelen van het geloof in morgenwijdingen* [I Believe; The Twelve Articles of Faith in Devotions], (Nijkerk: Callenbach, 1968) , 131. Cf. also: Arnold A Van Ruler, ‘De betekenis van het institutaire (in de kerk)’ [The meaning of what is institutional (in the church)], in *Theologisch Werk Deel 4 [Theological Works Vol 4]*, (Nijkerk: Callenbach, 1972), 176: “The church is namely a much more pneumatologically encompassing reality.”

Van Ruler has never written a book or thesis on ecclesiology, never given a systematic overview of the nature and task of the church. Instead we have a plethora of articles on various aspects of the church, especially on its task, its offices and its relation to the state. Nevertheless there are a number of emphases in Van Ruler’s writings which are important for this study. These are: a) the church is an eschatological community; b) the focus of the church is the world; c) the church is apostolic in nature; d) the church is an institution.

a. The church is an eschatological community;

There are two aspects here, the aspect of community and the fact that it is an eschatological community. It is possible to define the nature of the church in many different ways. Most common is to define the church as a faith or serving community, in the sense of a people in communion, in communion with each other, as well as the Mediator God.\(^3\) Van Ruler stresses the importance of community and communion (koinonia) in regard to the nature of the church.

And he says that where Christ is recognised as the king who reigns, there his people will form a community.\(^4\) Already in 1949 he devoted a whole lecture to

\(^3\) Arnold A Van Ruler, 'De kerk in een zich mondig noemende wereld' [The church in a world which calls itself 'come of age' ], in Theologisch Werk Deel 2 [Theological Works Vol 2], (Nijkerk: Callenbach, 1971), 107. He says: "In ieder geval: zij zelf (de kerk) is voor alles gemeenschap, gemeenschap met elkaar, gemeenschap met de middelaar, gemeenschap met de drieënige God." [In any case: (the church) itself is primarily community, a community with each other, a community with the Mediator, a community with the Triune God.] Cf. on ‘serving community’: Arnold A Van Ruler, 'De order der kerk' [The polity of the church], in Theologisch Werk Deel 5 [Theological Works Vol 5], (Nijkerk: Callenbach, 1972), 127. It is also possible to define the church as a community of pilgrim people. This aspect will not be developed.

\(^4\) Arnold A Van Ruler, 'Eschatologische Notities' [Eschatological Notes], in Theologisch Werk, Deel 1 [Theological Works, Vol 1], (Nijkerk: Callenbach, 1969), 228. “De messiaanse verwachting is in haar kern de verwachting van de ware koning, rondom wie eindelijk de ware gemeenschap van de mensen gerealiseerd wordt.” [The messianic expectation is in its kernel the expectation of the true king, around whom the real communion of people is realised.] Here the communion builds community.
the problem of community. “Humanity seeks community, but apparently never finds it completely.”

The aspect of community and being an eschatological community is also underlined in the WCC publication referred to above. It states: “As an eschatological community, the church already embodies something of what it is called to be, already experiences something of the reconciled life that is God’s gift in Christ and through the Spirit, but is painfully aware that this embodiment and this experience are not yet what they will come to be.”

In the context of this study it is important to note that the church not infrequently understood itself as an eschatological community. It is the faith community expecting and anticipating the coming of the kingdom. “The church is an eschatological reality, already anticipating the Kingdom.” The eschatological nature of the church is also stated by such theologians as Barth, Küng and

5 Arnold A Van Ruler, 'De vraag naar de gemeenschap in deze tijd' [The question of community at this time], in Verzameld Werk, Deel 3 [Collected Works, Vol.3], ed. Dirk van Keulen, (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2009), 54. He warns about the many ways which destroy community. “Rondom de levende God, gelijk Hij op de aarde aanwezig en bezig is, is er overvloed van gemeenschap. [Around the living God, as he is present and busy in this world, there is a flood of community].”

6 Christiaan Mostert, 'Reconciliation and the church', Pacifica 23, no. 2 (2010).195. In a footnote he adds a quotation, “… there is a continual tension in the historical life of the Church between that which is already given and that which is not yet fully realised”. WCC, Nature and Mission of the Church, §52.

7 Tillard does not seem to stress the eschatological nature of the church, even though he does stress the communion aspect. He calls the church the Church of God and defines it as ‘a communion of communions’. He says: “The nature of the Church, as early Tradition understands it, is, therefore, summed up in communion, koinonia. It is the Church of Churches. Understood in its context, it is the communion of communions, appearing as a communion of local Churches, spread throughout the world, each one itself being a communion of the baptized, gathered together into communities by the Holy Spirit, on the basis of their baptism, for the Eucharistic celebration. This existence as communion constitutes its essence. And the relationship to communion with the Father, Son and Spirit shows its deep-rootedness even in the eternal reality of the mystery of God.”, 29. Next he gives an overview of the various ways in which this communion is expressed, i.e. in prayer, the Eucharist, mission, etc. Communion is expressed in many different ways. It is not perfect but broken; nevertheless, has the aspect of the Trinitarian communion. J.M.R Tillard, Church of Churches, The Ecclesiology of Communion, trans. R.C.De Peaux (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1992), 33-45.


9 Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics Vol, II/1, trans. T.H.L.Parker and others (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1957)
Pannenberg. Mostert says that the church cannot help but be an eschatological community, because Jesus’ “… message and ministry had a strong eschatological flavour: the kingdom was so near that it was tangible, both in judgement and in salvation.”\(^\text{10}\) Barth also stresses the eschatological nature of the church when he asks

> As the Church … is it not in its own existence, in its inward and outward form and activity, one long anticipation of the future and still outstanding fullness of the redemption and consummation? … Is not the Church itself the eschatological fact *par excellence*? In other words, is it not the case that in it that which took place once for all in the Easter event, as the exit and entry of God into the world, may still be noted and experienced, and still takes place continually, in the existential reaching and claiming of countless individuals both within its own sphere and without?\(^\text{11}\)

Van Ruler says it this way:

> We have to keep our eyes open for the eschatological deeds of God. And we have to continue to see his historical deeds as eschatological deeds. There is more we can expect. In fact, we can expect very different things. We are God’s children now and it has not yet been revealed as to what we shall be. This applies also to the church.\(^\text{12}\)

Again, “… the church is also … a historical act of the eschatologically acting God”.\(^\text{13}\) It stresses not only the historical act of God but also its eschatological nature. However, in the eschaton the church will not continue in existence. He says that we have to acknowledge the open and unlocked character of the church.

> Even when we understand the church as the ‘body of Christ’ or as the total number of the elect, we have to take account of the indefinite and open character of the (eschatological) truth of God, and we have to realise that the church too, in its most pregnant sense, is not an essential and definite reality, but a historical act of the eschatologically acting God. In the kingdom of glory there will no longer be the church, just as there will no longer be the scriptures or a sacrament.\(^\text{14}\)

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\(^\text{11}\) Barth, *Church Dogmatics* Vol. II/1, 627.


\(^\text{13}\) Van Ruler, *De Vervulling van de Wet*, 53.

\(^\text{14}\) Van Ruler, *De Vervulling van de Wet*, 53.
Van Ruler stresses here the eschatological nature of the church, and that however we define the church, it has a passing nature and is God’s instrument to bring about the future kingdom. Furthermore, the church is the bearer of the gospel of the kingdom; its task is to proclaim the coming of the kingdom as part of its eschatological nature.

The WCC document, *The Nature and Mission of the Church*, gives several other definitions of the church such as: *The church as People of God; the Church as the body of Christ; the Church as the temple of the Holy Spirit and the Church as koinonia or communion.* The aspect of *koinonia* has been covered above. It is necessary to say something about the fact that Van Ruler speaks of the church as the ‘body of Christ’ very infrequently. This is not because he would have found this aspect unimportant, but simply because, in the context of his writing, he has stressed other aspects of the church, especially its eschatological nature.

Van Ruler does stress that the Church is the people; “the church - we ourselves are the church”. It underlines that believers constitute the Church as they follow Jesus as Lord. This relationship is so strong that it is possible to define the church also as ‘the body of Christ’, as the apostle Paul does in 1 Cor.12:27. However, as we have seen, describing the Church in this way ought not to take away from its eschatological nature. Stressing the eschatological aspect of the church, it needs to be remembered that the basis for the church rests in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The foundation for the Church, and also for the whole of the Christian life, is the resurrection of Christ. New life, a new way of being and a

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16 Van Ruler, *Ik geloof, de twaalf artikelen*, 130.
17 Van Ruler, *De Vervulling van de Wet*, 53 Van Ruler here use the term ‘body of Christ’, although he does not use the scriptural reference.
new relationship with God is given in the resurrection of Christ. The resurrection was also the basis and conformation of the kingdom of God. “This is an immovable given in the New Testament: that in Jesus Christ, particularly in his resurrection, the eschaton, nothing but the eschaton, the coming age, the new world has begun.”

In Jesus’ coming the eschatological age began, because Jesus proclaimed an eschatological message, namely that the kingdom of God was coming but as yet had not come in all its fullness. The tension between the ‘already’ and the ‘not yet’ remained. Jesus himself became the content of the message after his resurrection; for in that way the kingdom had proleptically been fulfilled. And so Jesus’ followers, the followers of the ‘Way’, who became the Christian church, became citizens of the eschatological kingdom, living the eschatological kingdom proleptically in the present. They already, here and now, live the joy of the perfected kingdom in anticipation.

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20 Mostert, ‘The Kingdom Anticipated’. Mostert alludes to this as “the third temporal location of the resurrection”, because it is added to the resurrection of the dead (second resurrection) based on the promises of Jesus’ resurrection (first resurrection). The third resurrection is lived by believers in this temporal life, it is lived in anticipation of the life to come. It certainly is an eschatological way of living, seeing that it is being lived from the future.
It is important to note that in stressing the eschatological nature of the Church, Van Ruler reminds us that it is actually God’s eschatological acting that determines the eschatological nature of the Church. He says: “The real thing is not what the church does but what God does with the church in his historical-eschatological action; that is the essential thing, also in respect of what it is to be the church.” The essence of the church is found in its eschatological nature, for the eschatological kingdom is proleptically present in the church. Again Van Ruler places the emphasis on the fact that it is God who is acting in history and that he brings about the eschaton, using the church as an instrument.

b. The focus of the church is the world;

The emphasis on the eschatological nature of the church becomes even more evident as we look at the next main emphasis of Van Ruler, namely that the church needs to keep its focus on the world. As stated earlier, Van Ruler emphasises that God’s salvation (heil) concerns the whole creation; it is the task of the church – and therefore a part of its nature – that this focus is maintained.

The church can easily lose its direction and focus, and concentrate only on its own existence. That is why Van Ruler says, … “worldliness (wereldlijkheid) belongs to the being (wezen) of the church. The church knows the apostolic gospel. It is the gospel of the kingdom. For this reason it concerns itself with the world. It is God’s world. Through Christ and the church, God’s concern is with the world.”

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21 Van Ruler, ‘De orde der kerk’, 127.
22 Van Ruler, ‘De kerk in een mondige wereld’, 102
Again, he writes, “Attention to the world belongs to the essence (wezen) of the church.” It is clear that for Van Ruler the focus of the church has to be the world.23 The church does not exist for itself. It also has to focus on the world.

The church does not only see humanity and the culture of tomorrow, but also the kingdom. That is, it sees the whole world, from beginning to end; it sees the meaning and goal of the world and of everything within it; it sees God’s concern with the world, his original and ultimate intent and all the moves which God makes in the ‘game’ of being (het spel van het ‘zijn’) in response to the moves of those who are liberated.24

The fact that the church is the proclaimer of the future kingdom and that the church is founded on Christ’s resurrection determine the eschatological nature of the church. Therefore, it cannot exist solely for itself.

c. The church is apostolic in nature.

The third emphasis that Van Ruler bears out in regard to the church is its apostolic nature, i.e. it needs to emphasise mission and proclamation. He states, “The church stands apostolically in the world.”25 "This means that it goes out in complete openness to all and to everything."26 This openness includes mission and proclamation. He says:

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23 Fuellenbach says that since Vatican II the outlook of the church has changed. It used to be: “The world was the subject that the church had to act upon or influence. The church was the active subject.” He says: “Now people ask: What can the church do to make the world a better place in which to live? Theologically this is based on the insight that the kingdom of God is meant for the world and that the church must see itself and its mission in the service of the kingdom.” And: “The church must see itself entirely in the service of this divine plan meant for the salvation of all creation.” John Fuellenbach, Church, Community for the Kingdom American Society of Missiology Series, No. 33 (New York: Orbis Books, 2002), 74, 76.

24 Arnold A Van Ruler, ‘De kerk in de komende cultuur’ [The church in the coming culture], in Theologisch Werk, Deel 5 [Theological Works, Vol 5], (Nijkerk: Callenbach, 1972), 97. Cf. also: Arnold A Van Ruler, ‘Bijbelse Toekomstverwachting en Aards Perspectief’ [Biblical future expectation and an earthly perspective], in Theologisch Werk, Deel 2 [Theological Works, Vol 2], (Nijkerk: Callenbach, 1971), 236, where Van Ruler speaks about how the world needs to be Christianised as much as is possible.


The church does not exist for itself, for its own good, … it exists for others and everything other. Its nature is apostolic. Its essence is the apostolate. It has been placed in the world with the gospel of the kingdom, in order that it will go out kerygmatically to all the nations on earth, to baptise them in the name of the triune God.  

This does not mean that the church only has to serve, that would be a one-sided image of the church. No, it also has to proclaim. The church has to call humankind to repentance, not just the human soul but the whole of life. The church needs to do this because it sees the world and humanity caught in heathenism and ungodliness. This is not just a pretension of the church, but comes from the aggression of God himself. This proclamation also includes an emphasis on social justice and its universal nature. To all of this the Christian faith is directed in its apostolic mission.  

In a German publication Van Ruler writes,

The presence of God in Christ is only a moment, albeit a decisive moment, in his total dealings with the world. What he wills and intends in these dealings is, in my opinion, that the world and we ourselves should be here, that this temporal, historical reality (Wirklichkeit) should really happen, that the history of every human being and of the nations on earth should be completed, that reality should be his image, that his name should be hallowed, his kingdom come, his will be done on earth as in heaven; in short that this life be dedicated to his service.

It is clear that Van Ruler sees the apostolic mission of the church extend to every aspect of reality, that is, the world and the whole of life. “All human concern with the material world, our whole active existence, culture, is as such the service of God. God is served in his world and nowhere else.”

This proclamation and the eschatological nature of the church serve the coming of the kingdom of God from the future, and the kingdom serves the

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27 Van Ruler, De Vervulling van de Wet, 75
28 Van Ruler, ‘De pretentie van de kerk’, 76, 77.
29 Arnold A Van Ruler, Gestaltwerdung Christi in der Welt - Über das Verhältnis von Kirche und Kultur [Christ receiving form in the world - About the relation between Church and Culture], (Neukirchen: Verlag der Buchhandlung des Erziehungsvereins. Received as a photocopy from the Protestant Theological University of Kampen, 1956), 8.
30 Arnold A Van Ruler, ‘De kerk is ook doel in zichzelf [The church is also goal in itself], in Verwachting en Voltooiing [Expectation and Completion], (Nijkerk: Callenbach, 1978), 63.
transformation of the world. Van Ruler does not always distinguish these two aspects.

Apostolic also means being missionary, according to van Ruler. “… not just individual persons or souls, but particularly nations, continents, cultures and states are the goal of the apostolic kerygma of the kingdom. The history of the church is inextricably interwoven with the history of the world.”

This kerygma also includes the proclamation of grace. As he states, “In preaching the full grace of God comes in Christ to humanity.” Indeed it aims at the whole of humanity.

*d. The church is an institution;*

The fourth emphasis in Van Ruler’s theology regarding the church is: the church is an institution. This is not surprising, for Van Ruler worked for years on a new Church Order for his denomination. It could be asked how important is this aspect of the church? And the answers would vary according to the importance this is given by the particular denomination.

Some denominations place a lot of value on the offices and institutional aspect of the church, while other denominations would ‘undervalue’ such aspects. This already becomes clear in the WCC Faith and Order Paper 198,

31 Van Ruler, *De Vervulling van de Wet*, 260.
32 Van Ruler, ‘De pretentie van de kerk’, 71. In the same article Van Ruler also adds that the church is not only apostolic, but also catholic in nature, which also includes the aspect of ‘synthesis’, 77.
33 Cf. Gijsbert Van den Brink, ‘Van Ruler in de Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk’ [Van Ruler in the Dutch Reformed Church], in *Men moet telkens opnieuw de reuzenzwaai aan de rekstok maken. Verder met Van Ruler* [One has to, time and again, make a mighty swing on the horizontal crossbar. Continuing with Van Ruler], ed. Dirk van Keulen a.o., (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2009), 137. Van Ruler put his stamp on the Church Order of 1951 and in this way had great influence in his denomination.
which finishes the section of ‘The Institutional Dimension of the Church and the Work of the Holy Spirit’ with the following statement “It remains for future theological work to find out whether these differences are real disagreements or mere differences in emphasis that can be reconciled with each other.” Van Ruler was an ardent supporter of the ecumenical movement, yet he did not want to diminish the importance of the institutional aspects of the church. Van Ruler devoted a whole article to the topic of the church as an institution, in ‘Church and Theology’ in October 1967, entitled: ‘The meaning of the institutional aspect (of the church)’. Speaking about the church being apostolic in nature and the task of proclamation, he states,

This accentuates the institutional moments in the Christian faith and in the church. One will also have to seek the working of the Holy Spirit first of all in these institutional moments, because the Spirit sets forth the Christ, inspires the Holy Scriptures, sends the apostles, creates the tradition, makes use of the offices and calls the worshipping church into being.

Van Ruler stresses that the church as an institution is important. The institutional aspect inherently belongs to the essence of the church, says Van Ruler. This connects with his emphasis on the apostolic proclamation and the threefold offices in the church. However, it does not mean that Van Ruler sees the church as static or immovable. He is aware that there is criticism in regard

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36 Van Ruler, ‘De betekenis van het institutaire (in de kerk)’ 183.
37 Van Ruler uses the Dutch word ‘institute’ which is translated here as ‘institution’. Hendrikus Berkhof makes reference to the difference between the church as an ‘institute’ and the church as a covenant community. He says, “the church has two faces: she is institute and community,...The relationship in which we stand to the church is twofold: we are in the church, we belong to the church – and together we ourselves make up the church. The second rests on the first; the first misses its goal without the second.” Berkhof, Christian Faith, an introduction to, 343.
39 Cf. Janssen, Kingdom, Office and Church Chapter 5, 183ff.
to the emphasis on the church as an institution.\textsuperscript{40} It is a frequent complaint that the church is too static, or lacking in authenticity. Many find that the church as an institution is a hindrance for ecumenicity and the unity of the church.\textsuperscript{41} Van Ruler does not accept these criticisms and says that it is necessary for the church to be an institution in order to be a visible and organised church.\textsuperscript{42} As soon as people begin to work together and acknowledge the guidance of the Spirit an institutional element comes into the church. He says:

How are we human beings the church? How are we incorporated into Christ? How do we experience the \textit{unio mystica cum Christi}? How do we possess eternal life? How do we live in the divine love? When it comes to the point must we not answer all these questions with ‘in essence institutionally’? Granted, by faith, we are grafted into Christ. But how does this receive form (\textit{gestalte}), how does it become a reality (\textit{levenswerkelijkheid}) for us? Primarily and centrally in the sacrament, in the liturgy, by membership of the church, in communion with the offices, in preaching as the permanent offer (\textit{toediening}) of salvation. These are all institutional elements, permanent and inherent forms in which we possess eternal life.\textsuperscript{43}

In other words, Van Ruler maintains that we cannot do without the institutional element of the church. He also stresses that the church is alive and dynamic,

\textsuperscript{40} Tillard places the emphasis on the church as communion. Speaking about Pentecost and the birth of the Church, he says: “The community which appears in full light on the day of Pentecost is the Church, but the Church of God, the \textit{Ekklesia tou Theou}.” In: \textit{Tillard, Church of Churches}, 12. He adds: “But this Church of God is destined to be spread through the impetus of the Pentecost experience. It will spring up everywhere Babel will cease, everywhere human reconciliation will take shape because, in faith and baptism, men and women will be placed under the mastery of the Spirit of the Lord. There will be communities and each one will be \textit{Ekklesia tou Theou}. In this way the Church will multiply itself without being divided.”, 13. Perhaps a too optimistic view?

\textsuperscript{41} Van Ruler, ‘De betekenis van het institutaire (in de kerk)’, 177, 179, Van Ruler does not mention particular resources and authors in this section, but gives a summary of various views of which he is aware; negative views in regard to the church as an institution.

\textsuperscript{42} Berkhof remarks on this point: “…, for centuries the institutional aspect has dominated. Only through the Reformation, and even more in the free churches, has the community aspect evolved.”, 344. He says for many centuries the church was seen as the institute of salvation. “It was conveniently overlooked that “church” refers to many different communities and “institute” to many different organisations.” 345.”…the churches are forms of organization that belong to the genre of institutes. Like all institutes, their right to existence is based on interpersonal activities they bring about and maintain. The uniqueness of the churches lies in the nature of those activities….The concern of this institute (church) is thus participation in the covenant event….we came to know as the work of the Spirit.”, 346. Next Berkhof defines the church as a ‘transmission institute, which has nine essential elements, namely instruction, baptism, sermon, discussion, Lord’s Supper, diaconate, worship service, office and church order. 347. It would have been interesting to have had Van Ruler’s reaction to Berkhof; however Berkhof’s publication appeared after Van Ruler’s death. Surely, Van Ruler would have found much that he would have recognised.

\textsuperscript{43} Van Ruler, ‘De betekenis van het institutaire (in de kerk)’, 193.
through the power of the Spirit. For it is this same Spirit who not only helps us relate to the past and to tradition, but also directs our view towards the future.\(^{44}\)

He says:

> By virtue of its essence the church as an institution stands in the tradition and thus is a moment or form (gestalte) of the course of the apostolic word through the world. The church is completely oriented to the past, for there, in history, salvation is situated. Equally, the church is oriented forward, for there, in the future, salvation has be to realised in the living reality of human beings (levenswerkelijkheid). In this way the church as an institution stands in the present: it ‘traditions’ (tradteert); it passes salvation on from the past to the future. Anything more than the church as institution is unimaginable.\(^{45}\)

It is clear that Van Ruler emphasises the church as an institution and sees this as an aspect of the eschatological nature of the church, for he says: “In the eschatological perspective of all things the institutional aspect also stands in the centre; it is the means by which human society is set up, the new earth on which righteousness dwells! That belongs to the true service of God.”\(^{46}\)

For Van Ruler the church as an institution is important, because he sees the church as a means through which God works, bringing about the kingdom of God in this world. It is perhaps not the only medium, but certainly one of the ways in which God brings salvation to the world.

There are also various aspects of the church Van Ruler emphasises which fall outside the scope of this study, like the relationship of church and state\(^ {47}\), the offices of the church \(^ {48}\), as well as the unity of the church.\(^ {49}\) Especially the

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\(^{44}\) Van Ruler, ‘De kerk in de komende cultuur’, 103.


\(^{46}\) Van Ruler, ‘De betekenis van het institutaire (in de kerk)’, 185

\(^{47}\) Van Ruler, ‘Structuurverandering’, 130 ff.

\(^{48}\) Janssen, *Kingdom, Office and Church*, 12ff. Janssen made a special study of Van Ruler’s doctrine of the offices.

\(^{49}\) Especially in regard to the unity of the church, it must be said that Van Ruler was ahead of his time. For although there were discussions between denominations, Van Ruler stressed that the church needed to become unified as a worldwide body. In a famous interview Van Ruler stated: “In the first place, I state that the divisiveness of the church is not only worldly but a scandal, and
relationship of church and state was important to Van Ruler, but it would deviate too much from our discussion to enlarge on this topic.

In summary, it is clear that for Van Ruler the church is eschatological community. Its eschatological character is also expressed in its apostolic nature, its task of proclaiming the message of hope and salvation. The eschatological character is expressed further in its apostolate, its mission in the world. The church must keep its focus on the world. However, the institutional nature of the church is no less important for him. “The institutional aspect of the church is part of the very essence of the church.”

4.2 The purpose and task of the church

It is possible to define the church, its nature and task, in different ways. The church as a worshipping community comes together for the purpose of worship, praise, proclamation and communion. The church congregates in order to celebrate the liturgy. The church is the communion of saints, a fellowship and communion of those who share the faith and this arches across many centuries. The church’s task is to reach out in mission to those who experience injustice, poverty or oppression. The church is to be the “cathedral of love”, as Van Ruler calls it. Stating that preaching is not to be the only task of the church, he says:

in the presence of God just guilt … this divisiveness is itself an impossibility… and the one visible church cannot be less than a world church (wereldkerk).” Here Van Ruler does not only mean that the church needs to be there for the world, but also in its unity needs to show it is a world-wide church.

Van Ruler, ‘De kerk is ook doel in zichzelf, 58. Here Van Ruler uses the same word as Berkhof does.

Van Ruler, ‘De kerk is ook doel in zichzelf’, 61, 63.

Van Ruler, Ik geloof, de twaalf artikelen, 132. Cf. also: Arnold A Van Ruler, ‘Hoe waardeert men de stof?’ [How do we evaluate the material?], in Verzameld Werk Deel 3 [Collected Works Vol 3], ed. Dirk van Keulen, (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2009), 122: 'Human life is: praise-
“The church is the reality of ‘agape’ in the world.”53 The church is the historical presence of God’s love.

However, the question central to this dissertation is: what is the purpose and task of the church in relation to the kingdom of God? In this context it needs to be said that the church is a function of the kingdom, and not the other way round. This is not to deny the importance of the church, but to realise that the church is not the last word. “The church may not arrogate to itself the finality and glory of the kingdom, but the reality of the kingdom is present in the sign of the church in an anticipatory way”, says Mostert.54 Similarly, Van Ruler says that the task of the church is to proclaim the salvation received in Christ and in that way the church points to the kingdom ushered in by Christ.55 The church bases its proclamation on the resurrection of Christ and the eschatological era that this heralded.56 The church proclaims salvation to the people, to the state and the nations. He says: “The church as bearer of the gospel of the kingdom is set in the world. The kerygma is its organising centre, around which stand the sacraments and the offices … the communion of saints; the good works and the experiences; faith, hope and love.”57 Therefore the church has an interest in and a duty towards the culture and social aspects of life. It is concerned with the life of

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53 Van Ruler, ‘Stadia in het innerlijke leven’, 706.
55 Van Ruler, ‘De betekenis van het institutaire (in de kerk)’, 183.
56 Cf. also Wolfhart Pannenberg, The Church (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1977), 51.
57 Van Ruler, De Vervulling van de Wet, 75.
individuals as well as communities, with the political and spiritual aspects of human beings. It therefore is involved in the work of social-diaconal care as well as the spreading of the gospel and theological training.\textsuperscript{58}

In summary, Van Ruler acknowledges that the church has been given many tasks in the world. It is to reach out to the nations of the world, be there for others. It is the body of Christ and as such needs to proclaim and baptise (Matt.28:19). It has to proclaim that God’s work has been fulfilled to all authorities and powers (Eph.3:10). It is not necessary to enumerate all of Van Ruler’s aspects on the church. The next section is closer to the theme of this study.

4.3 The church and the kingdom

Van Ruler does not tire of saying that the church exists for the world and that the gospel is the gospel of the coming kingdom. The church looks beyond itself and focuses on the world and humanity, but always in relation to the coming kingdom. He states:

\begin{quote}
The church sees not only humanity and the culture of tomorrow, but the kingdom. This means the church sees the whole world, from beginning to end; it sees the meaning and the destination of the world and everything in it; it sees God’s action in the world, its original and ultimate purpose…seeing the kingdom, and knowing the essence of being (zijn) – that is the church.\textsuperscript{59}
\end{quote}

In order to show how strong this emphasis is in Van Ruler’s theology, it should be noted that he says of the church: “It sees the kingdom and it sees that the kingdom has various forms. That is why it loves also the forms of the world ...

\textsuperscript{58} Van Ruler, ‘De betekenis van het institutaire (in de kerk)’, 200.
\textsuperscript{59} Van Ruler, ‘De kerk in de komende cultuur’, 97.
But the church must not only see the Messiah. Precisely in and through the Messiah, it must continue to see the kingdom.”

Care needs to be taken in determining the relation between the church and the kingdom, for there is an obvious difference, but also a similarity between the two. Van Ruler insists that church and kingdom are not identical, there is a difference between the ‘ecclesia’ and the ‘basileia’. In the past identification of the two has taken place. It has often been stated that the church is – or will be - the kingdom of God on earth. That is incorrect. There is a relation between the two, with a positive as well as a negative side. It is not right to say that the church is only a function of the kingdom. Certainly, the kingdom will have the last word, so to speak, but this does not diminish the value and importance of the church as a community or as an institution. Mostert calls the church a ‘vestibule’, which suggests that the church can be compared with a foyer where God’s people are introduced and also reminded of the salvific contents of proclamation. It underlines that more is to come, that the fullness of the reign of God is awaited. The church is the only place where the message of salvation, grace

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60 Van Ruler, ‘De kerk in de komende cultuur’, 99.
61 Cf. what Pannenberg says: ‘Like Clement and Origen, Ambrose and Augustine thus equated the church with the heavenly kingdom of God, the heavenly civitas. Augustine did make efforts to distinguish the future form of the kingdom from the present form of the church, in which the tares and wheat grow together (Civ.Dei 20.9.1). Nevertheless, for him the church was already the kingdom of God and of Christ, and so it be in the age that followed.’ Wolfhart Pannenberg, Systematic Theology Vol.3 [Systematische Theologie], trans. Geoffrey W Bromiley (Michigan: Eerdmans, 1998 ), 34. Also page 37: “The church, then, is not identical with the kingdom of God. It is a sign of the kingdom’s future salvation. It is so in such a way that this future of God is already present in it and accessible to people through the church, through its proclamation and its liturgical life.”
62 Fuellenbach gives a good overview of the arguments used by some for an identity of the church with the kingdom in history. Fuellenbach, Church, Community for the Kingdom, 76ff. He also gives an overview of those who do not support an identity between the two. Helpful is his conclusion: “With these statements the official church has passed another milestone. In Vatican II the Christian church was no longer totally identifiable with the Catholic Church alone. The church was seen as embracing other churches as well. Now it is stated that the kingdom of God is not to be identified with the Christian church.”, 87.
and life can be heard. The church has the authority of Christ and the apostles. Moltmann stresses God’s reign when speaking about the church. He says: “The church is therefore not a restricted religious community … Nor is it a fellowship of like-minded people … The church, with its cult and its attitude, is the earthly form of Christ’s lordship, which overcomes the world, and it is the instrument of his liberation of this world.” Van Ruler says that the church proclaims the gospel and is the gospel of the kingdom. “The world as the kingdom of God – that is and remains the vision, which is burning on the horizon of all Christian interpretation and experience.” In other words, the church’s task should never be underestimated, but the world remains the focus.

Hans Küng remarks, “As an eschatological community of believers, the church is not a fill-in, a compromise solution and ersatz kingdom for the kingdom of God which was awaited in vain. The eschatological community of believers is not in opposition to the reign of God, nor are the two unconnected…” Neither is the church simply the earthly form of the kingdom. Van Ruler calls the church a form (gestalte) of salvation in Christ, but not in the sense that in the eschaton only the church will remain. “What remains is not the church, but the kingdom.” The church itself is a sign of the coming kingdom.

In brief: mission is the most complete concept of the church. And this most complete concept of the church appears in scripture under the heading of signs of the times, signs of the coming kingdom, in the same category as the catastrophes in nature and history … and everything that belongs to it.

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65 Van Ruler, ‘De kerk in een mondige wereld’, 102.
66 Küng, The Church, 94, 95.
67 Van Ruler, ‘De kerk is ook doel in zichzelf’, 55.
68 Van Ruler, De Vervulling van de Wet, 67.
In summary, it needs to be said that there is a definite relationship between the church and the kingdom. It is the task of the church to point towards and proclaim the coming of the kingdom. The church is a pre-sign (voorteken) of the kingdom, a plurality of signs. “It is to be seen as the reality of fulfilment…“\(^6\) It is the proleptic presence of the kingdom, a presence of the future.

4.4 The church and sacraments as signs of the kingdom

The church is often called the sign of the kingdom. Or better stated, the church is one of the signs of the kingdom, since there is a plurality of signs. It is usual to speak of the sacraments as signs, for they point to something beyond themselves.\(^7\) The same may be said of the church. The church points beyond itself to the reality of the kingdom, the kingdom that has come and is yet to come. So there are many signs; Van Ruler speaks of a plurality of signs. He says: “The church is a plurality of signs of the kingdom.”\(^8\) They point to what is to come, which is what they signify. Again it is necessary to mention mission. Van Ruler says: “With the word ‘mission’ the widest context and at the same time the internal kernel of the Church of Jesus Christ is given; everything is stated in this that possibly could be stated about the church. Mission also includes the sacraments and offices.”\(^9\) Van Ruler relates this to the coming of the kingdom. He speaks of the “teaching of the signs of the times as fore-signs or fore-conceptions (voortekenen) of the coming kingdom”.\(^10\) These signs have several purposes, not the least of which are those of mission and christianisation.

\(^6\) Van Ruler, De Vervulling van de Wet, 67.
\(^7\) Van Ruler never speaks of the church as a sacrament, but only as a sign. Cf. also note 35 above.
\(^8\) Van Ruler, De Vervulling van de Wet, 68.
\(^9\) Van Ruler, De Vervulling van de Wet, 67.
\(^10\) Van Ruler, De Vervulling van de Wet, 65. The word ‘fore conceptions’ I have borrowed from Timothy Bradshaw who uses it in his discussion of Pannenberg. Cf. Timothy Bradshaw, Pannenberg: A Guide for the Perplexed (Wiltshire: T&T Clark, 2009), e.g.17.
In fact, he speaks of both the world and the church, as a plurality of signs of the kingdom and these have been placed by God in the world for its salvation (heil). These signs of the church and world do not exist as parallel to each other, but are like concentric circles. They are eschatological in nature.\(^74\) The signs point beyond themselves to the kingdom of God. They are part of the presence of the future. They represent and prefigure the future kingdom, which overpoweringly pushes itself into the world.

Van Ruler says: "The origin of the signs is election (praedestinatie), the secret of the signs is the overpowering presence of the kingdom of God and the essence of the signs is that in a hidden manner it is filled with the matter which it signifies."\(^75\) Van Ruler’s definition applies not only to signs like catastrophes, wars and rumours of wars, but also to the mission of the church, as well as the sacraments. The sacraments have always been accepted and valued as the clearest signs of the kingdom by the church. In the sacraments, instituted by Christ, the church has been able to recognise the promise and the power of the coming kingdom. In these signs, the things signified brought comfort and strength to the believer, for they were the visible signs of the salvation received. As the bread is broken for us, it becomes the sign and seal that Christ’s body was broken for our salvation.

One may wonder whether Van Ruler fully values the sacraments as signs, for he seems to speak of the signs as ‘poorly’. “The signs are ‘only’ (slechts) signs, in their sombreness, humility, poverty and even repulsiveness (afzichtelijkheid) in

\(^{74}\) Van Ruler, *De Vervulling van de Wet*, 60. In this context Van Ruler also uses the word prefiguration.

\(^{75}\) Van Ruler, *De Vervulling van de Wet*, 69.
its earthly form”. With this he does not mean to diminish the value of the sacrament, for he also says on the same page, “This does not take away from the fact that in these poor forms we partake of the full salvation, albeit in the humble manner.” By putting the signs in this light, he make a contrast with the richness and power of the kingdom, for he says: “It is not that this world in its impotence points above itself to the kingdom, but the kingdom pushes itself overwhelmingly into this world.” This he says also applies to the church.

Another distinction van Ruler makes is by speaking of negative and positive signs. The positive signs are the sacraments. The negative signs are the catastrophes and wars. He says: “Wars need to be understood like sacraments; as in the sacrament the bread is broken (and therein lies God’s gentility (zachtmoedigheid)), so in wars and all catastrophes, the world is broken. In her present state the world is the hiddenness (verhulling) of her own salvation” Perhaps Van Ruler has particular reasons for mentioning this. Was he thinking here of the horrors of war he experienced during World War II? The presence of God in the world is more hidden than it is in the church, says Van Ruler.

In chapter 6 the subject of the sacraments and their nature as signs of the kingdom will be discussed further, particularly in connection with the concept of ‘anticipation’. But it is important here to note that the sacraments are part of the church’s celebration of salvation and are also a sign of the reciprocal relationship between believer and God. Not only is the sacrament important as a sign of the

76 Van Ruler, De Vervulling van de Wet, 70.
77 Van Ruler, De Vervulling van de Wet, 70.
78 Van Ruler, De Vervulling van de Wet, 70.
79 Van Ruler, De Vervulling van de Wet, 70. The brackets are Van Ruler’s. The sentence between brackets does not seem complete; most likely Van Ruler indicates that in the broken bread of the sacrament God comes to us mildly and in gentleness, this in contrast to the severity and cruelty of war.
presence of God in Christ and the coming kingdom, it is also a sign that believers ‘make it their own’ (toe-eigening).  

Van Ruler stresses this because “the sacrament is something that is done by the triune God and human beings together … The sacrament is therefore not just a moment in the tradition, a form of representation. It is a form of the eschaton”. In the sacrament the proleptic and salvific presence of the kingdom of God is actualised and experienced by the believer.

We could add that the sacrament signifies where salvation will be completed and indicates that the believer is involved. Even more boldly, Van Ruler says, “The sacrament is something that the triune God and the believer do together, …Without the communicating person, come of age, the sacrament is not possible”. Importantly, Van Ruler stresses: “The sacrament (already) stands in the eschaton, more so than in the tradition. It is the eschaton in the hiddenness (verhulling) of the present”. Very clearly here Van Ruler speaks of the prefiguration or fore-conception of the kingdom. In the sacrament we have the anticipation of the kingdom and the presence of the future.

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82 Van Ruler, Reformatarische opmerking, 140. Van Ruler uses two Dutch words here: eigenhandig and eigenmondig; they both indicate that it is a person who knows what is happening and able to decide.


84 See also Chapter 6.4:Realisation and the sacraments. Italics mine.
In summary, it needs to be stressed that not only the sacraments are signs of the kingdom, but Van Ruler also sees mission, liturgy and the church itself as a plurality of signs of the kingdom. Christ, the Messiah, who fulfils all things, is also a sign, the sign, the great sign of God’s presence and ultimate goal and action.  

4.5 Church and the world

Van Ruler acknowledges the difference between church and kingdom, but also gives a nuanced account of the relation between the two. He says: “God is present in the church, hidden and glorious. But God is not present in the church, in all his hiddenness and glory, as he is present in the world.” He acknowledges God’s presence in both, yet in the world the presence is even greater and more glorious than in the church, albeit in a hidden manner. At the same time he is determined not to establish a false dualism between church and world, as if God would be more present in the church than in the world. In fact he says, “It is due to our weakness that we have to find God in the church, in the world his hiddenness and glory, his concealment and fulfilment are too great for us.”

In section 4.1b it was stated that the church needs to focus on the world. Here the relationship between the two receives further attention. The church is not God’s goal for the world. God has a hidden final purpose with the world, one we do not know, but one so glorious that it is impossible to conceive its form or shape, says Van Ruler. This glory will be unveiled or revealed in the eschaton. Already this purpose and glory has been fulfilled, be it in a hidden manner. And the

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85 Van Ruler, De Vervulling van de Wet, 86 and 110.
86 Van Ruler, De Vervulling van de Wet, 70.
87 Van Ruler, De Vervulling van de Wet, 70.
88 Van Ruler, De Vervulling van de Wet, 60.
church points towards this. On the same page Van Ruler says: “Apparently in the parousia (voleinding) the purpose is not just the church. One cannot even say that God does his eschatological deeds, which he does in the world, exclusively for the sake of the church.” Van Ruler is concerned about the world.

One of the tasks of the church is to proclaim the importance of the world. The church needs to continue to proclaim this importance of the world. In his dissertation Drost draws attention to the fact that – as important as the church is – this may not lead to isolating ourselves as Christians from the world. Never is the church allowed to become ‘a Christian ghetto’. The church has to stand in the world in an apostolic manner, i.e. in a manner in which it reaches out to the world. The world has to hear the message of God’s love for humanity and the whole world. The world has to be christianised (gekerstend). Van Ruler believed that the Holy Spirit permeates the world with the gospel of the kingdom and brings about the Christianisation of all nations and culture. He called this ‘sanctification’ and saw it a part of the mission of the church. In this way Van Ruler maintains his focus on the world.

This focus on the world is important to Van Ruler and fits with his overall emphasis on God’s creation in his theology. He even says that attention for the world belongs to the essence of the church. The church proclaims the apostolic

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89 Van Ruler, *De Vervulling van de Wet*, 60.
91 Cf. also Janssen, *Kingdom, Office and Church*. See esp. Ch.3 “The Church as Bearer of the Gospel and as Gestalt of the Kingdom.”, 80ff.
93 Van Ruler, *De Vervulling van de Wet*, 516
94 Van Ruler, ‘De kerk in een mondige wereld ’, 102.
message, namely the gospel, and in final instance that is the gospel of the kingdom. This message shows that God is concerned with this world; after all it is his world. And God’s work – through Christ and the church – is for the wellbeing of the world. The world as the kingdom of God, that is and remains the vision of all Christian interpretation and experience.  

Does this mean that the church can lose itself in the world? Is the world the only focus of the church? Van Ruler maintains a tension, but also a balance. He stresses that the church is the place where we learn about repentance, about redemption and the forgiveness of sins. The fact that the church states its solidarity with the world does not mean that it loses its message in service to the world. Salvation has come in Jesus Christ and is proclaimed in all its dimensions by the church. It is not possible to do without the church, because for the proclamation, for confession, for communion and celebration, for the offices and for the mission to the world, as well as the celebration of salvation, the church is needed. Thus the church is necessary in the world, for the world is in need of it.

Having said this, it is again necessary to make sure that the balance is maintained. This salvation (heil) that consists in the forgiveness of our sins, in the power to conquer sin, in the conquest of death and the gift of eternal life, needs to be balanced by the notion that this redemption and reconciliation of guilt ought not to receive all the emphasis. The preaching of Christ is not allowed to become only a soteriological message. It is more. To make the salvation received in Christ just a personal matter, would turn redemption into a perverse message, as if it only concerns the individual person. The purpose of redemption

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95 Van Ruler, ‘De kerk in een mondige wereld’ 102.
96 Van Ruler, ‘De kerk in een mondige wereld’ 117.
is the world, the whole humanity, the whole community, the whole of society.

And Van Ruler means the whole reality (*werkelijkheid*) for he says: “… the fulfilment of all things in Christ means that the whole reality is made into signs of the kingdom of God.”

It will be clear from the above discussion that the church does not have an easy task. It is a task threatened with danger. How does the church keep its message clear and undefiled? This is important, particularly when it is acknowledged that the church has a task, to proclaim the lordship and reign of God in *all* areas of life, including the spheres of work, science, culture and art. If all these areas have to be Christianised, as Van Ruler stresses, it must be acknowledged that the church cannot escape the danger of being adversely influenced by the world. The danger of compromise or corruption is never far from the door of the church.

Van Ruler acknowledges this openly: “The essence of Christianity is a mixture… A pure Christian culture is an illusion. .. all Christian culture is in principal and necessarily impure.” In other words, it is not possible to keep the gospel in a pure and uncontaminated manner. This does not mean, however, that the church should feel intimidated and relinquish its task. Rather the opposite, the church needs to be faithful to its purpose and task of proclaiming the eschatological message with ardour.


98 Van Ruler, *De Vervulling van de Wet*, 221. Addition in brackets mine.

99 Arnold A Van Ruler, *Droom en gestalte; Een discussie over de theologische principes in het vraagstuk van christendom en politiek* [Dreams and Form; A discussion of the theological principles in regard to the relation Christianity and Politics] (Amsterdam: Holland, 1947), 135.
4.6 Church and the presence of the future

From the above it becomes clear that Van Ruler stresses several aspects of the church. The church needs to keep its focus not only on the world, but also on the coming kingdom of God. The church witnesses to the fact that the kingdom is already among us, yet does not deny the tension between ‘already’ and ‘the not yet’. The church is not the final goal of God’s creation or the coming kingdom. Rather, the church needs to proclaim the kingdom; the kingdom will supersede the church. The church has no lasting permanency, it is a function of the kingdom. The church maintains the tension between the ‘already’ and the ‘not yet’ of the kingdom. In the church we hear the message that was proclaimed originally by Jesus. Of this Mostert says: “His message and ministry had a strong eschatological flavour: the kingdom was so near that it was tangible, both in judgment and in salvation”. Van Ruler would fully agree with this.

Moltmann says: “The church in the power of the Spirit is not yet the kingdom of God, but it is its anticipation in history.” Van Ruler puts it this way: “What we are waiting for is the revelation of the salvation (heil) which now, hidden, is truly present.” The church is a sign of that presence, but also more. The church is the proleptical presence of the kingdom and in the church we practise, celebrate and experience the ‘anticipated’ kingdom. The church as God’s eschatological community is the anticipatory sign of the eschatological reign of God.

In summary, this chapter dealt with the overall relationship between church, the world and the kingdom. The church is God’s instrument for the world in which the Holy Spirit empowers the people of Christ, called his body, to focus on the

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100 Mostert, 'The Kingdom Anticipated', 5.
102 Van Ruler, De Vervulling van de Wet, 55.
world as the kingdom of God coming from the future. Therefore the eschatological nature and task of the church must be acknowledged as an essential part of the doctrine of the church. The church is the anticipatory sign of the kingdom of God, in its doxological, liturgical, diaconal and missional life in the world. In its fellowship and life, in its worship and service in the world, the eschatological future of God’s reign becomes present in the power of the Holy Spirit.