

Christian and Neutral Politics

Election fever is raging in Canada and the U.S. Will the Liberal government call for a federal election? Who will become the next president of the U.S., the world's most powerful nation? Many people believe that it does not make the slightest difference for which party or politician our vote. Politicians do what they please. They are only interested in power and benefits and not in the common citizen. Nowadays, politics is often talked about with skepticism and even cynicism.

How can Christians serve in politics and seek the welfare of their nation? It is my contention that the greatest tragedy of our time does not lie in the dominance of either this or that non-Christian way of thinking but in the loss of faith and direction among those who call themselves Christians. In the process Christianity has become irrelevant, impotent, privatized, marginalized, and reduced to the status of mere private preference. Daily we see and experience the devastating effects of secularization and a secular way of life, people acting "as if God does not exist or matter."

Does God matter as we enter the voting booth? Dr. H. Bavinck's stirring speech Christian and Neutral Politics reminded me again that we may not hide our Christian convictions in the rough and tumble political arena. And what Bavinck, internationally renowned Reformed theologian, said in his time is still applicable today. As the parliamentary election of 1905 approached, partisan politics in Holland intensified. Dr. Abraham Kuyper, the prime minister in power, was either hated or loved.

Liberals and the Socialists were united in bitter opposition to Kuyper and his cabinet. Bavinck brilliantly defended Kuyper's government. In his address delivered at the Anti-Revolutionary Party Congress in Utrecht on April 13, 1905, he stressed that the party's electoral success was due to Kuyper's dynamic leadership. However, the ultimate basis for the party's unity and strength was a common commitment not to a person, although highly respected, but to principles which have endured the test of time.

In our North American society great many people simply take for granted that religion and politics have nothing to do with each other. Bavinck said that liberals claimed that religion is a private matter of the heart, of the family, and of the church. It should stay out of politics and education. Liberals called the public schools bastions of neutrality and tolerance, unifying the nation. Christian schools were called sectarian, polemic, and propagandistic, undermining national unity, leading to disintegration and decay. They confessed the "dogma of one, holy, universal, neutral, public school for the whole nation." Kuyper's government was accused of mixing religion with politics, thereby profaning religion, curtailing liberty, and promoting divisiveness. The liberals waged a negative smear campaign, viciously attacked personalities. Orthodox Christians were accused as intolerant and reactionary obscurantists while the liberals presented themselves as cultured progressives. The latter, like the Canadian liberals, believed that they had the inherent right to rule the Netherlands. By hook and crook liberals wanted to regain their privileged position and succeed to wipe out through their so-

called neutral politics the Christian character of the Dutch nation. They allowed no room for Christian participation in politics unless Christians agreed to play by the rules that supposedly kept religion out of politics the schools, and kept the liberals in charge of directing society and the nation. The latter meant, of course, intolerance and unjust discrimination against many citizens.

Bavinck argued that liberals were ignorant of religion, especially the Christian religion. Since 1905 little has changed. Perhaps North American liberals are even more ignorant of religion due to their secular education system. Bavinck pointed out that all human beings are religious by nature.

Religion is the root of all human action. Our religion is what we think, do, and say every moment of our lives. It is not possible for anyone to be an unbeliever. The secular worldview is as deeply religious as the Christian.

We either are faithful to the Triune God or live in unfaithfulness to Him. You serve either God or idols -the idols of human autonomy, scientism, evolutionism, and materialism. Neutrality leads to the enthronement of unbelief and to the undermining of the spiritual and moral foundations of the nation. Freedom of religion, therefore, does not only mean the right as an individual to practice his or her religion. It implies that we should be able to practice our faith in every sphere of life - including politics. Bavinck showed, therefore, that the real opposition to Kuyper's cabinet was a secular rejection of its Christian basis.

The Christian concept of antithesis, a burning campaign issue, became the next focus of Bavinck's remarks. He noted that liberal ideology is not an open enemy attacking the Christian faith with physical weaponry. Its insidious, subtle opposition to the Christian faith is practically unnoticed. It suggests that the mastery of the world can be achieved by scientific advancement, by technology, and by the liberation of individuals from the constraints of religion and tradition - the modern notion of progress. It does not necessarily rule out the existence of God. A vague, nondenominational Unitarianism, may be acceptable, but the Biblical revelation of God lies beyond the pale. Bavinck pointed out that the Christian religion is not neutral between truth and falsehood. The unflinching antithesis between liberal ideology and Christianity makes meaningful cooperation between the liberal and socialist parties impossible.

It would be a denial of the antithesis between the Christian and modern world view. The struggle between belief and unbelief is the theme of world history.

North American Christians tend to take a moralizing approach to improve the moral conditions of their nations. They concentrate on all kinds of ethical issues such as abortion, euthanasia, gambling, same sex benefits, extra-marital relations etc. Of course, all these issues are very important, but individual and social ethics will not necessarily change the moral fabric of our secular society. Our task calls for communal Christian action directed by the full-orbed power of the Word of God. Bavinck asserted that politics and morality are linked. But the moment a politician brings morality into the debate, he is accused of moralizing. But there is nothing wrong with accounting for your convictions and trying to shape them into laws and into policy. In fact, this is the true

nature of the democratic process. It has nothing to do with enforcing your morals upon others. The question is not whether we legislate morality, but whose morality we legislate. The standard for law is not found in human beings, but the idea of law comes from God. God given law is universally valid. The principles of freedom, dignity, and justice are part and parcel of God's created and willed order. Morality then is rooted in religious faith. Whether in marriage laws, oaths taking, in Sunday observance, etc., the government gets confronted with religious-moral principles.

One goal of the Kuyper government was to protect the moral character of public life, to retard and if possible, to end the demonic influences on society such as drunkenness, gambling, public indecency and pornography. Social legislation was planned to correct these public corruptions, legislation based on the Christian traditions of family, of church, of justice unfolded in Scripture. Kuyper's government was not reactionary but progressive in its view of social justice. It sought justice for the poor, the widows, the orphans, and Sunday as a day of rest. Concern was shown not only for the underclass in society but also for the neglected middle class. Bills were introduced for insurance law revision, health insurance, public health codes for housing, improved street safety, technical education, regulation of labour contracts, protection against unfair industrial competition, and a personal taxation bill. Education reform was one of the key items on the social justice agenda. The liberals denied the right of Christian parents to educate their children according to their beliefs. Kuyper's government aimed to give the same legal and financial support to both public and Christian school systems. Support for Christian education was not at the expense of public education. Bavinck scorned the familiar argument that Christians are egoists and materialists in asking for equality in education. He said that the public education system received funds from taxes, which are also paid by Christians. He commented that public financial support is only a means to reach the high goal to build an educational system on the principles of the Christian faith. Why should parents be treated in unequal ways depending on whether they choose a government run public school or a Christian school for their education?

Kuyper's government didn't achieve full support for primary Christian education. But the ground work was laid for it. However, the Higher Education Law of 1905 did put public and Christian education on equal academic footing.

Bavinck did not foresee a utopia on earth. He mentions that Christians neither sing praises of past times nor complain bitterly about present miseries. They don't despair but they work for reformation of social and public life, keeping in mind that ideal living conditions won't come on earth before the return of Christ in glory. Christians don't have any exaggerated expectations of future bliss on earth, knowing too well the weaknesses of sinful human nature. Politics can be abused when the welfare of the party is put before the welfare of the nation, when politicians lust for power and strive for success, when they are engaged in verbal mudslinging, make false promises and assassinate the characters of their opponents. Bavinck says that it is understandable that pious Christians withdraw from politics and refuse involvement in the political fray. They want nothing more than to know God inwardly and to feel Him spiritually. Consequently, they no longer see God in the creation He had made. They reduce the claims of Jesus Christ the King to the conversion of "individual souls" and leave the "principalities and powers" that govern our lives in the hands of liberal ideologues.

Bavinck acknowledges the dangers of political engagement. Yet he says that politics is a glorious and holy art. The earth is the Lord's and its fullness thereof. Nothing is unclean of its own. Politics can be sanctified through the Word of God and prayer. A Christian politician is someone with both a reborn heart and a Biblically formed political vision. Politics is a calling from which the noblest of Christians may not withdraw. If Christians are not serving Christ in politics according to the norms of Biblical justice, then they are serving some false gods that will lead to injustice.

Christians cannot serve the Lord part-time. He calls us to His service in every sphere of life with all our heart, soul, strength and mind. Christian principles are needed so that politics will not degenerate into money grabbing at the expense of the taxpayer or into a power seeking enterprise. Bavinck declared that all who name the name of Christ, also in politics, should avoid all appearance of evil!

Bavinck's speech was a call for election readiness. He appealed to the members of the Anti Revolutionary Party to hold high the Christian banner throughout the election campaign. The Christian faith once and for all delivered unto the saints, the faith of the fathers, gives the courage and strength to engage all who want to continue to penetrate the Dutch nation with the liberal spirit of neutrality. Bavinck has a message for us. While the forces of unbelief and secularism continue to tighten their grip on North America on practically every sphere of life, the Christian community needs to heed his appeal for a normed democracy and principled Christian political engagement. This is not the time for despair. We may not underestimate the liberating power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which can even break the formidable power of secular politics.

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