

Church and State Relations

The late Dalton Camp, journalist and radio commentator, criticised Conservative Elsie Wayne's 1995 drive to restore the Lord's Prayer to the Canadian House of Commons. He noted that not every member of the House is a Christian. And not all of the constituents of the honourable members are Christians. "Since the House of Commons represents all Canadians," said Camp, "of whom some are Christians and others are not, *the true religion of politics and government is secularism.* (The italics are mine). No one needs to be a Christian to be a politician. And vice versa." And Camp referred to the Americans "who took pains to draw the line in their constitution to forever separate the church from the state." Elsie Wayne could pray in private or with other Christians in an assembly of gathered saints but not in the House of Commons.

Separation of Church and State

The vast majority of Americans and Canadians have been taught to believe that church and state ought to be separated by an impenetrable wall. They are convinced that their position of religion and politics is the only way to guarantee religious freedom. In their opinion, diversity of religion is adequately protected in private life -where confessional religion should be confined. The public arena is treated as one big melting pot without structural boundaries or confessional distinctions.

By asserting that religion must be totally separated from government and from civic responsibility, the religion of secular humanism has been adopted. The tie that binds the public arena is secularism. It is believed to be the only legitimate world-view. Therefore any different points of view - for example, the ideas of Bible - believing Christians are automatically excluded. This is a grave error and a fundamental violation of religious freedom since it ignores the reality of religious - expression in all areas of life. For those who take the Bible seriously as the authoritative Word of God for their lives, all of life must be viewed from the Biblical perspective, including political life. J.W.Skillen points out that the big questions for Christians are not about whether the Bible has something say to politics, but about what the Bible says and about how to interpret those text in the context of our times.

Religion cannot be confined to the four walls of either home or church. It is the root of all human action. It is the driving force behind every activity. It is central and integral in every human life, and as such it influences every human activity.

North American society, for example, is a very religious society. Secularism, materialism, and the welfare state are its civil religions. Religious neutrality is impossible. Everyone looks at life from a particular point of view. And actions are based on beliefs. Therefore, a political view cannot be separated from some kind of religious faith. Secular politicians base their view on the false belief that human beings are creators of their own values. For the secular humanist God is out of the picture. The chief concern in the separation of church and state is disputing over whether citizens are free to live according to their convictions outside of their churches. It is an argument for pluralism as a matter of principle and one from justice for the proper treatment of all

citizens. They should be free to conduct family life, schooling, and politics in a way which is consistent with their faith commitment.

No Theocracy

The secular view of separation of church and state gives a wrong impression of its historic meaning. By "separation of church and state" we do not mean that the government should be neutral, but that the government shall not oppress or suppress the Church and vice versa. And our acceptance of Biblical authority and our interpretation of Bible texts does not lead to theocracy, the absolutizing of certain Old Testament experiences, laws, and customs as the "model" for a contemporary state. Dr. Evan Runner points out that it is not proper to crave for the times of Old-Israel, as if the Theocracy could be revived. He said that it would be a failure to understand Christ's redemptive work. It would mean an abandonment of Christianity for Judaism. Nor is the will of God to be communicated to state officials through the medium of any church or denomination. We believe in the right of private judgment.

We may not mix church and state together. The sword Paul speaks about in Romans 13 was not given to judge in spiritual matters. We cannot compel anyone into the Kingdom (cf. Zech. 4:6).

Normed Democracy

But the separation between church and state does not mean that the state is neutral. In Christian politics we argue for a normed democracy, which recognizes the divine order for the state. The sovereignty of God must be recognized in all spheres of life, including the sphere of government. The will of God, by which we are to be governed, is revealed to us in the Word of God.

Differences Between Church and State

There is a very marked difference between the spheres of state and church. For example, it is the moral duty of the government to treat all citizens as equal regardless of their faith. However, the church cannot allow people as members, who do not believe in Jesus Christ. The church does not owe its rise to the state, but acknowledges Christ as its Source and King. The Scriptures, the creeds and the confessions all describe the "church" as the body of Christ. Elders, deacons, and God's covenant people in the pew, all make up the church. The church deals with spiritual matters. She proclaims the Word of the Lord. This is a loaded declaration. In other words, the church must be careful before she speaks out on issues of the day. The task of the Church is to preach and teach the Gospel (Matt.28 :19). Through the Word the Lord exercises His rule in the world. There is not one sphere in life where He does not rule, including political questions. But the pulpit may not be used as a platform to promote a social and political action program.

The pastor enfolds the Word in such a way that the mature Christian can do what he must do: to seek and know the will of the Lord. The church can serve the world only when it proclaims the Gospel of salvation and grace for this life and the life to come.

Government is an institution of divine origin, independently of whether the persons of the government fear God. It is the servant of the Lord. It deals with earthly relations and finds its purpose in the maintenance of law and order in human society. It exists to promote the good of society, to recompense the one wronged, to reconcile differences, to recover public order, and establish justice. The Gospel gives content to justice and righteousness. Government does not have the right to predefine the limits and scope of religion. Nor should it have the right to give itself a monopoly over the so-called "secular" world. Government needs to establish the right of parents to be principally responsible for the education of their children. The failure to allow parental choice of "religious" schools does constitute discrimination against some religions as well as against some parents. In other words, church and state are distinctive from each other, just as the fingers are noticeably different from the hand and yet cannot be separated from each other without doing irreparable damage to both. The state takes its place not *above* but alongside the Church.

Duties of the State Toward the Church

The state may never exercise the right to frame laws determining the religious views of its citizens or the government of the church. Freedom of conscience and, freedom of religion should be guaranteed to all citizens, including non-Christians. Dr. Runner emphatically stated: "Hands off the Church in all respects!" He said that if Christianity is to be the salting salt, it is first of all necessary that the State not invade the sphere of the Church, but permit the Church to carry out its task.

Duties of the Church Toward the State

Not only has the state a duty to fulfill to the church, the church likewise has a vital duty to the state. No church nor denomination should presume to dictate how a state should fulfill its God-given duty. This would mean lording it over the state. The duty of the church is summed up in the Westminster Confession (Art.31,sec.4): "Synods and Councils are to handle or to include nothing but that which is ecclesiastical; and not to intermeddle with civil affairs which concern the commonwealth, unless by way of humble petition in cases extraordinary; or by way of advice for the satisfaction of conscience, if they be thereupon required by the magistrates." The church may rightly exert only an indirect influence upon the state by affecting the consciences of its citizens and officials. Dr. H. Henry Meeter points out that the more the consciences of officials and citizens are Christianized, the greater will be conformity in matters of religion and morals by the state to the law of God.

Conclusion.

Governments are as directly accountable to God as are parents and teachers and pastors. This simple truth stands as a startling contradiction to the North American way of political life. The dominant belief is that the government is ultimately accountable to

the people, not directly to God. The question is, how the government should fulfill its distinct obligation before God.

As Christians, we may never forget that the state is not the highest authority. We know another Kingdom. This Kingdom, revealed in Jesus Christ, demands our complete and final allegiance. So, while respecting, obeying, serving and praying for our governments, we keep looking forward to the coming of the King, whose subjects we are.

Johan D.Tangelder.
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