



Clarion

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*Kingdom
Citizens in
Secular
Canada*

*Christian
Politics:
What Does it
Involve?*

*Political Apathy
Is Not a
Christian Virtue*



Influencing Society for Good



C. Van Dam

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Kingdom Citizens in Secular Canada

The Lord wants us to be salt and light in a world that has a tasteless morality and lives in darkness

Shaking foundations

With the civic morality of our country dropping to ever lower levels as witnessed most recently by our national parliament passing the same-sex marriage bill last June, many Christians are asking themselves: What can be done to halt the apparently unstoppable slide of Canada going ever deeper into being a modern Sodom and Gomorrah? What used to be considered an abomination and sin, for the Lord said it was so, is now exalted as good and is defended as a human right. "The wicked freely strut about when what is vile is honoured among men" (Ps 12:8). There is no doubt about it; the fundamentals of our national life are being shaken. With the psalmist, we can ask: "When the foundations are being destroyed, what can the righteous do?" (Ps 11:3)

Society has to change before politics will.

Last fall the Burlington Reformed Study Centre organized a series of lectures under the theme of "Kingdom Citizens in Secular Canada." The first evening explored how we got into the present predicament. Dr. F.G. Oosterhoff, a retired historian, gave valuable historical background on being involved in the public square as Christians by giving us a brief historical tour of how Christians in The Netherlands sought to fulfill their political task. Rev. Tristan Emmanuel, Executive Director of the ECP Centre, dealt with the problem of Christian apathy and some of the dynamics involved in this. The second evening investigated how we can effectively impact for good. This basic question was addressed by Mr. Ray Pennings, who has worked both for the Christian Heritage Party (CHP) and the Alliance Party,

as well as by Mr. Ron Gray, the leader of the CHP. The speeches or summaries of them can be found in this issue of *Clarion*.

Responding to the challenge

It is very important to note that virtually all the speakers made the point that if we want to oppose secularization and make a difference for our country, we need to start with our daily walk and talk as Christians. To be sure, the truth must be proclaimed, but it must also be demonstrated in our lives. If each Christian in this land aggressively lived his faith in the face of secularism, the salt of the gospel could have quite an impact. The Christian's daily life and the collective witness of the local church is really where it all starts. It is good to underline that. We owe it to our society to show that the gospel has real answers for the problems of today and we can start demonstrating the solutions in how we interact with society in the place where God has placed us.

Now our churches, societies, and schools are of course very important and we rightly invest considerable time in them. However, considering the state of our land, we must be mindful not to ignore what is going on outside our immediate community. The danger of placing ourselves in a self-imposed isolation is not imaginary. Our country needs Reformed people to be involved more than ever before. We need to be involved in local civic affairs and network with others in our society; we need to be involved in moulding our contemporary culture at all levels. We are no longer immigrants or immigrant churches. Although it is easy to stay within our own comfort zone, this is a temptation we must not fall into. The Lord wants us to be salt and light in a world that has a tasteless morality and lives in darkness. Our voice needs to be heard.

But how can our voice, our Christian testimony, best be heard? There is no single answer. Ray

Pennings reminds us that politics is not always as important as it is made out to be. Society has to change before politics will. Our first duty therefore lies in being agents for the transformation of society. Depending on the gifts the Lord has given us, we must be active as *Christians* in every level of society wherever the Lord has placed us.

When it comes to politics, Dr. Oosterhoff warns us not to use the Dutch model of confessional parties as our template. Canadian Christians have historically been integrated in mainline parties and not faith-based parties. Furthermore, because we have no proportional representation, there is little hope of a Christian party electing a Member of Parliament. This is a sobering realism which we need to factor into the equation.

Yet, as Mr. Ron Gray has eloquently argued, we need to carry the banner of the biblical truth high in this country and keep God's norms central. This testimony includes the need to develop alternate policies for our land, policies that both meet biblical criteria and are persuasive for our secular society. Our country needs to be convinced that policy grounded in biblical principles is good policy for reasons that can be demonstrated. Here much work can and should be done and the CHP can continue to facilitate and do much of this.

Get involved

How one gets involved is, at bottom, not as important as simply being involved. There are many ways to work as Christians. At the most basic level we are to be an effective salt and light in our daily task and in our neighbourhoods. Individually and collectively, if Christians and the church are faithful, their influence can be profound! Furthermore, one can be involved in supporting Christian think-tanks and special Christian advocacy groups, working for political parties such as the federal CHP or, in Ontario, the Family Coalition Party. One can also seek to influence by working within an existing political party. Exactly how one works politically is a matter of personal conscience. South of the border, decades of hard work by Christians to infiltrate the Republican Party have made a big impact on that country.

The bottom line for all of us is that we need to do our utmost to be involved in our country's weal and woe and seek to make a difference as Reformed believers. We also need to be aware that this is going to be a long and tough battle. It is a life long endeavour. So, let us as Christians persevere!

As you read this issue of *Clarion*, may it stimulate and challenge you! May we as kingdom citizens living in secular Canada never be justly accused of apathy. May the Lord bless our efforts for the good of our country!



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Christian Politics, What Does it Involve?

Tonight and next week we speak about our calling as Christians in a secular society. Among the topics to be discussed are the causes of today's secularizing trend, the strategy we should follow in trying to stem that trend, and the best means of organizing politically. With respect to the last issue, we would seem to have two options. One is to join a Christian political party, such as the Christian Heritage Party; the other is to do what many Christians south of the border are doing. It is to organize as a Christian alliance and so attempt to influence one of the mainline parties. In the United States that is the Republican Party. In Canada it would most likely be the Conservatives.

Dutch Reformed politics

My presentation is meant as an introduction to these discussions. It will not deal with Christian politics in Canada as such, at least not directly. I will focus instead on The Netherlands and on the way Reformed believers in that country have tried to fulfil their political calling.

The reason why this topic was chosen is not that the Dutch model can serve as a blueprint for us here in Canada. This should be stressed at the start, for to ignore it can

easily lead us astray. After all, as Reformed people of mainly Dutch descent we have been influenced by the Dutch tradition, and one of the reasons why we have been hesitant to get involved in politics may well be this Dutch heritage. That is, we may still harbour the conviction that the only acceptable political organization is with committed Christians, preferably Reformed ones.

Those who ignore the mistakes of the past run the risk of repeating them.

The fact of the matter is, however, that the Dutch model does not really fit the Canadian context. Canada lacks a tradition of confessional parties; Christians here have generally voted for a mainline party. Canada also has no proportional representation. The man or woman who gets the highest number of votes in a riding is elected; the votes that are cast for competing candidates are lost. As long as Christians form a minority in each of Canada's 308 ridings, their votes are wasted when cast for a separate party. This is unlike the Dutch system, where votes are counted

nationally, so that even smaller parties have a chance of getting representatives in Parliament.

The Canadian situation, then, discourages the type of political involvement that is possible in The Netherlands. This does not mean, however, that the history of that involvement should be ignored. We can learn from it with respect to strategy and organization, and also with respect to the *nature* of Christian politics. That is, it can help us find an answer to the question as to what truly Christian politics involves. For a century and more, Reformed thinkers in Holland have attempted to formulate biblical principles on these issues, and their work should not be forgotten. In paying attention to it we should note not only the positive insights and achievements, however, but also the failures. After all, as an American philosopher has reminded us, those who ignore the mistakes of the past run the risk of repeating them.

Dutch "pillarization" – the first phase

The history of Reformed politics in Holland can be divided into two phases. The first one began in the late 1800s and lasted into the second half of the twentieth century. The second began after

World War II and continues today, although there is evidence of decline. My main concern is with this second phase, but to explain its origins and character, something must be said about the first one as well.

At the beginning of the first phase, the dominant power in The Netherlands was the liberals. They controlled the government, the universities, the schools, and much of the rest of society. Their rule did not remain unopposed, however. There were three groups that challenged the liberal monopoly. They were the orthodox Protestants or Reformed, the Roman Catholics, and the social-democrats. Each of these had its own political party. The party of the Reformed was the Anti-Revolutionary one of Groen van Prinsterer and Abraham Kuyper.

Reformed believers built dividing walls against the world and against each other.

A big issue for both Reformed and Roman Catholics was the school system, which had become increasingly secularized. Reformed and Roman Catholics were allowed to establish their own schools, but they had to pay for these themselves and at the same time help support the public system. The two groups got together in an attempt to remove this injustice, and their cooperation paid off. In 1917 a law was passed that guaranteed full financial subsidy for separate schools. To ensure socialist

support, the two religious parties agreed to the socialist demand that all adult male citizens receive the right to vote.

What we have in these developments is the start of a typically Dutch phenomenon, namely that of "pillarization" (Dutch: *verzuiling*). This term refers to the organization of society into separate groups or pillars that are distinguished by their worldviews. Each of the four pillars had its own media, its own socio-economic organizations, its own radio-broadcasting, and often even its own choral and sports groups. In addition, the religious pillars had their separate schools, colleges, and universities. All pillars were equal in the sight of the government and could, if certain conditions were met, count on financial support – not only for the schools but soon for other associations and activities as well.

During the first half of the century the system of pillars had a good deal of support from the Reformed and Roman Catholic constituencies. The religious parties often formed the government. After World War II, however, enthusiasm for pillarization declined. The theology of Karl Barth played a role here. People also remembered that in their resistance against Hitler liberals, socialists, and communists had worked with Reformed and Roman Catholics. Why, they asked, could this cooperation not continue in peace time? Increasingly people deserted their own pillar to vote for a "national party" – often a socialist one. The Roman Catholic and Reformed parties withstood the trend for a while, but by the 1970s it

was clear that the old system of pillars had had its day. Secularization engulfed the country, bringing with it an erasure of religious and worldview boundaries.

The second phase

There were exceptions to this trend, however. Some Reformed people continued to believe in the need of separate action in politics and other areas. Prominent among them were members of the liberated Reformed churches. In 1948, well before the demise of the Anti-Revolutionary Party (ARP), these people broke with that party and established their own, the GPV (*Gereformeerde Politiek Verbond* or Reformed Political Alliance).

Political cooperation with other Christians should be possible.

There was more than one reason for the break. It took place four years after the church liberation (or *Vrijmaking*) of 1944, and in the early years much stress was placed on the so-called ethical conflict between the liberated and the "synodicals." Organizers of the new party argued that until the injustice done to their group was admitted and the schism healed, no political cooperation was possible. They also raised objections to the fact that the ARP was non-confessional and interdenominational. A confessional foundation (that is, a foundation on the Three Forms of Unity) had been avoided on principle, as unnecessary for

politics. The basis of the ARP was simply the confession of God's sovereignty and the authority of the Bible. In practice this meant that Christians could become party members regardless of church affiliation, including (for example) Baptists. The founders of the GPV, on the other hand, believed that a truly Christian political party should be based on the Reformed confessions. They further rejected any kind of interdenominationalism and held that their party should consist of members of the liberated churches only. And so the GPV denied membership to people of other churches, no matter how orthodox and how sympathetic to its political program.

This was a radical departure from tradition and threatened to restrict the new party's outreach quite drastically. Not nearly everybody therefore agreed with the approach. K. Schilder was among those who warned against it, arguing that by establishing their own separate party the liberated churches would marginalize themselves and be unable to influence politics. Schilder eventually broke with the ARP (in 1949), but he never joined the GPV.

That party's existence during the first years was precarious. Many church members continued to reject a political break. After the schism of the 1960s, however, when some 30,000 members left the liberated churches, attitudes changed. For a while the churches would present a more united front, in politics as in other matters, and the new party began to flourish. In 1963 it had been able to send its

first representative to Parliament, and eventually even a second seat was won. By the 1970s and '80s, when the old ARP disappeared from the scene, its successor was well established.

Also well established by this time was the new phase of pillarization in The Netherlands. Although it was on a much smaller scale than before, there were close resemblances. As during the first phase, divisions were drawn in practically all areas of life. In addition to their separate political party, members of the liberated churches had their own newspaper, their own socio-economic organizations, their own elementary and secondary schools, colleges, institutions of care, and so on. A striking *difference* with the first phase was that the lines of separation were drawn not only with respect to the world, but also with respect to other Christians. Reformed believers built dividing walls against the world and against each other.

These organizations are important as means of preparing believers for their task in the world.

This continued for some years, but in the end opposition to a radically exclusivist approach revived and gained in strength. In the 1970s non-liberated Reformed people who had supported the GPV but were refused membership established their own party, the RPF (*Reformatorsche Politieke*

Federatie). This factor, combined with other developments to which I will give attention later, convinced GPV leaders that interdenominational cooperation was necessary if the Reformed voice was to be heard at all. In the 1980s the two Reformed parties began to support each other's candidates and in 2000 they finally united, under the name *Christenunie*. This type of departure from the *vrijgemaakte* tradition of pillarization took place not only in politics but in other areas as well. The Reformed daily newspaper, for example, also loosened its ties to the liberated community and allowed as editors members from elsewhere. Attempts for union with other Reformed churches were also intensified.

Divisions

The departure from liberated-Reformed isolationism has been met with relief by a good number of church people, but there are also many opponents. In fact, the new approach has played a role in yet another schism, the so-called "new liberation," which so far has attracted some 1250 members. But these secessionists are not alone in their protest. The divisions run through the churches.

The arguments that are marshalled on either side are of interest, and I will give an overview of the deliberations. We begin with those who oppose amalgamation. I already touched upon their arguments, so that I can be brief. Firstly, these people reject Abraham Kuyper's theories of a visible and invisible church and of the pluriformity of the church. Referring to Articles 27 through 29

of the Belgic Confession, they conclude that there can be only one true church in any location. Other churches are by definition false, and any sort of cooperation with them is out of the question. Even the willingness by their members to subscribe to the Three Forms of Unity is insufficient, since their refusal to join the true church shows that in practice they fail to honour the confessions.

Another argument, connected with the first, is that life is one, that church membership comes before all else, and that it therefore must determine one's activities in all areas of life, including politics. If this means that one's outreach remains limited, so be it. Christians must obey the command and leave the outcome to God.

The other side

The other group, the one that favours amalgamation, accuses its opponents of theological one-sidedness. While admitting that one can raise objections to Kuyper's theory of the church, these people disagree with the idea that we cannot speak at all of the invisible church, or that there can be only one true church in any location. J. Douma, professor emeritus of the theological university in Kampen, has shown that this idea is of recent origin and was taught neither by John Calvin nor by the author of the Belgic Confession, Guido de Brès. Douma and others also question the idea that the *ecclesiastical* divisions among Christians must lead to separation in all areas. They point out that that conclusion also was not drawn in the past. It was only after the *Vrijmaking* that

interdenominationalism *per se* was seen as a heresy. Before 1944 Reformed theologians, including men like K. Schilder and B. Holwerda, saw no problem whatsoever in cooperating with other Christians in a variety of areas, including politics and the schools. As we have seen, even after 1944 Schilder believed that political cooperation with other Christians should be possible.

*We are members of society,
share in its guilt, and
must work for its peace
and welfare.*

Neither did these theologians insist that all such cooperation must be based on the Reformed confessions. There was widespread agreement with the view of Herman Bavinck, who had said that the extent to which the confessions have to play a role depends on the field of engagement. Bavinck distinguished four areas, namely evangelism, the work of charity, education, and politics. With respect to evangelism, he said, cooperation between people who did not adhere to the same confessions and were not members of the same church was virtually impossible. The objections were not as strong, however, in the case of education and work of charity, and even less so in politics. Douma is among those who agree with this view. He asks opponents to explain why confessional statements about the church, for example, or about

infant baptism, should have any bearing on politics. Douma admits that participation would be impossible if a political party should ask us to deny our confessions. But if this is not the case, he asks, why should we refuse to work with others for the good of the nation?

I may add here that the legitimacy of working with others was at least tacitly admitted within the liberated churches. When necessary to get government subsidy, they did and do cooperate with other Reformed groups, for example in establishing institutions of care. In other areas, such as the fight against abortion, there is cooperation even with Roman Catholics.

The advocates of amalgamation also justify their position with practical arguments. They point, for example, to the decline in the number of GPV supporters in recent years. A new generation has arisen that does not see the issues of 1944 as politically relevant and that demands cooperation with other committed Christians. It does so at a time when the urgency for such cooperation becomes more and more evident. An early warning sign was the introduction, in 1981, of the concept law for equal treatment; a law that could make it possible, it was feared, that Reformed schools would be forced to hire homosexual teachers. Issues like same-sex marriage and the legalization of abortion and euthanasia became additional reasons to seek political cooperation with fellow-believers. So did European integration and the desire to have a Christian voice in the European Parliament.

Drawbacks of pillaring

Those favouring amalgamation have offered reasons of a different nature as well. Their reasons concern not only cooperation with fellow-believers but the legitimacy of Christian organization as such. The question is being asked, for example, if the practice of pillarization has not been counter-productive. Douma mentions an article by evangelical author Oliver R. Barclay, who sharply criticizes the Dutch tradition of pillarization. Barclay argues that the system of separate Christian organizations has contributed to the rapid pace of secularization in The Netherlands. It is among the reasons, he believes, why the level of public morality in that country is lower than in other parts of Europe where Christians have continued to work in mixed organizations.

Although Douma rejects the idea that we should get rid of our Christian organizations, he admits that an important point has nevertheless been made. Christians are a salt and a light in the world. They are not to hoard the salt for themselves and shine the light only within their own circle and their own organizations. These organizations are important as means of preparing believers for their task *in the world*. They become a stumbling block and a liability, however, if they serve as fortresses that Christians erect for their own protection and benefit.

Gerrit J. Schutte, leader of the GPV in its final years, agrees that the danger of which Barclay and Douma speak is a real one. Pillarization in the Reformed

tradition, he points out, had as *goal* the re-christianizing of the nation, and used as *means* the establishing of separate organizations. The means succeeded very well but the goal was not reached. The result of pillarization has all too often been to protect one's own Christian group rather than to offer help to a world in need. Indeed, the fortress mentality has been so strong that one no longer knew even one's fellow-believers in other churches.

There is considerable irony here. The reason why Reformed people engage in politics is their confession that all of life belongs to Christ. A separatist, Anabaptist kind of isolationism from society is therefore out of the question; yet the history of Reformed politics in The Netherlands shows that pillarization can in practice lead to such isolationism.

Conclusion

In my brief (and admittedly very incomplete) description of Reformed politics in The Netherlands I have drawn quite a bit of attention to the mistakes that can be made when as Christians we become politically involved. I did not do so to discourage Christian political outreach, which I am convinced is necessary. We are members of society, share in its guilt, and must work for its peace and welfare. Concretely this means that we are to remind rulers and subjects of God's sovereignty over all of life, and of the requirement to honour his laws. Organized political action can be an important means to fulfil this task.

But in making use of that means, we must be aware of potential dangers. My study of Dutch pillarization in particular and of Christian political activity in general suggests to me that we should guard especially against the following drawbacks or pitfalls:

1. Believing that our political cooperation must necessarily be restricted to members of our own churches or confessional circles. I think we should keep in mind Dr. Bavinck's arguments on this point, as well as Reformed practice in The Netherlands before 1944.¹
2. Withdrawing into our own organizations and neglecting the needs of society. I am referring here to Oliver Barclay's charge that by circling the wagons Dutch Christians have failed in their responsibility toward society and so contributed to its rapid moral decline. Although Canada does not lend itself to the type of pillarization that existed in The Netherlands, the danger of forgetting that we are a salt and a light *for the world* confronts us as well. To the extent that they ignore this danger, Christians are indeed not only among the victims of secularization, but also among its causes.
3. Misunderstanding the nature of our political task. The political duty of Christians is not to safeguard their own particular group, nor is it to declare

warfare on the rest of society and act as one of many special interest groups, fostering an "us versus them" mentality.² To repeat what I said before, our political task is to promote the peace and well-being of society. We fulfil it by reminding rulers and subjects that a turning away from the biblical moral code is to court disaster. Social well-being depends on obedience to God's laws, which are laws of life and therefore the best possible ones for all people. This must be the primary political message.

4. Failing to realize that that message must be delivered wisely, intelligently, and with an expert understanding of the issues involved. If we want to have a voice in the courts of the nation we had better know what we are doing, or else our efforts will have only a negative effect and become a source of embarrassment and ridicule. On this point, I may add, we can learn something positive from the current Dutch Reformed tradition. In spite of their small size, the GPV, and now the Christenunie, are highly regarded in The Netherlands by both friend and foe for their hard work, their expertise, and also for their compassionate approach. This began with the first representative, P. Jongeling, and continues today.
5. Looking at organization as the be-all and end-all of the Christian political life. Of

course, organization is important. The truth that God's laws are laws of life must be proclaimed as widely as possible, and political organization is a means of doing that. But if the truth must be *proclaimed*, it must also be *demonstrated*. This means that it must be modelled in the daily life of Christians. Deeds speak louder than words. In the words of an evangelical author, "The Kingdom of God is best spread, not when we force its ethics on others, but when we demonstrate through tender care for our own and our neighbor what the gospel looks like."³ And that neighbour, incidentally, may be a militant homosexual or an abortionist. The time may come that a life of *modelling* the truth of the gospel is the only means left to us to fulfill our political task. Such a situation would not be unprecedented. It existed in the early church and it still exists today, namely in countries where there is no freedom of speech, association, and religion.

In Canada, however, we still have these freedoms, and political engagement in the customary sense of the term remains possible. We should make use of that opportunity, all the while helping each other to find the criteria for truly Christian politics. I hope that this conference will contribute towards that end.

¹ Groen van Prinsterer's well-known slogan "In our isolation lies our strength" has been used in support of the idea that church and political party should coincide, but wrongly so. For Groen (who stayed with the state church, rather than joining the Reformed), isolation meant steadfastness in adherence to biblical principles. He specifically rejected the idea that it referred to seclusion and 'political cloistering.' See on this point J. Kamphuis, *Evangelisch isolement* (Vuurbaak, 1976), pp. 9f, 44.

² Evangelical author John MacArthur warns against the danger, which he notices especially among American Christians, of seeing secular society as the enemy and of following the strategy of unbelievers, resorting to aggressive lobbying, intimidation, and confrontation. Society, he writes, is our mission field, not our enemy, and the Christian's task with respect to society therefore consists not in warfare but in faithful prayer, godly living, and diligent evangelism. John MacArthur, *Why Government Can't Save You: An Alternative to Political Activism* (World, 2000). On the same topic see also American evangelical author Michael S. Horton, *Beyond Culture Wars* (Moody Press, 1994). Horton affirms the Christian's political calling, but warns against a political approach by Christians that may adversely affect the advancement of God's Kingdom.

³ Darrel Bock in *Christianity Today*, September 2005, p. 87.

Speech by Tristan Emmanuel
Summarized by Herman Faber

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Political Apathy Is Not a Christian Virtue

Introduction

How is it that our culture (the West in a general sense) has come to abandon the principle of “public theism” for a “public agnosticism”? The answer, unfortunately, is not flattering. It is my contention that secularism is a by-product of Christian apathy.

Historically, Christendom represented the holistic integration between Christian religion and the various spheres of human existence both in private and public. It was rooted in the belief that God governed all of life, private and public, spiritual and secular. It is precisely for this reason that Calvin appealed to the King of France, in hopes of persuading him to consider the truthfulness of the Protestant faith and, in turn, to defend it:

It will then be for you, most serene King, not to close your ears or your mind to such just defense, especially when a very great question is at stake: how God’s glory may be kept safe on earth, how God’s truth may retain its place of honor, how Christ’s Kingdom may be kept in good repair among us. Worthy indeed is this matter of your hearing, worthy of your cognizance, worthy of your royal throne! Indeed, this consideration makes a true

king: to recognize himself a minister of God in governing his kingdom.¹

What was in dispute was not the king’s authority in these matters or the fact that politics was a proper domain for religion. It was simply a question of which faith to defend.

The early church was equally aware of the principle of “public theism.” To be a Christian in that day of state rule and Caesar worship, a disciple and follower of Christ (Acts 11:26) had to confess very publicly that Jesus Christ is the Saviour, Messiah, and Lord. All three titles violently challenged Rome’s preoccupation with its own cultural humanism. It was precisely for these public “faith” commitments that the early church suffered so grievously.

Moreover, the Jewish ethos was equally challenged. When Christ declared Himself to be the only true Messiah – a Jewish reference to the anointed office of the seat of King David (also referred to as “Anointed One”) – Christ was challenging the stated theology of the Jews, who had appointed the Sanhedrin as their body politic. It is important to appreciate that Christ was not betrayed and handed over to the Romans because of the miracles He did, but because the Jewish hierarchy viewed Him as a threat to their public control of the people. Thus,

the confession that Christ is the Messiah was in direct opposition to the Sanhedrin’s authority and the claims of King Herod.

Things have radically changed in our day however. Today we have serious debates as to whether or not we can participate in rallies or protests and whether or not we should even speak out against Caesar’s claims to provide universal and material salvation for its citizens – acting beyond what is its divinely mandated mission: to defend the innocent and punish the evil doer (Rom 13:1-6). What has caused this change?

I suggest three factors which contributed to the disengagement of Christians in public life. First is the general abandonment of culture and history in the wake of Darwinism – what I call the “As the West goes, so goes Christianity” fallacy. Second, Christians have conceded the ground of “objectivity” to secularism in the area of political social-theory. I call it the “myth of neutrality.” Third, there is the ontological elevation of the state – the political positivistic fallacy prevalent with many pacifists and pietistic Calvinist circles. All three factors have contributed to the advancement of secularism in Western culture generally and Canadian culture specifically.

1. Abandonment of culture and history

The change from a cultural principle of “public theism” to “public agnosticism” rests with the church. On the general level it is the church’s anti-intellectualism coupled with a preoccupation with “end times” that has helped to advance and institutionalize secularism.

Are we the last generation before Christ returns, and if so, what should our priorities be, politics or evangelism?

Instead of endeavouring in society, competing for a consistent Christian view of knowledge that didn’t separate reason from faith, Christians abandoned the academy and therefore abandoned society, law, media, the arts and entertainment, and, yes, politics. Pious believers instead turned to spiritual pursuits –missions, Bible study, and prayer.

Western academics quickly began to integrate Darwinian cosmology (i.e. the survival of the fittest) with a scientific social theory. The liberal academy hailed a new order of progress whereby science, economics, and political social theory would finalize human evolutionary development.

Further, the fact is that the world wars, the Cold War, and now the rise of secular hedonism have radically affected the outlook of the Christian community when it comes to the doctrine of the “end times.” As a result of the dark forces at play in the West, the church has become obsessed with the question: “is our time, the time of the end?” Are we the last

generation before Christ returns, and if so, what should our priorities be, politics or evangelism?

This paradigm (as the West goes, so goes Christianity) became popular among Evangelicals with Francis Schaeffer. Of course there have been others before him promoting a specific eschatological school, but Schaeffer popularized it. Books with titles like: *The Late Great Plant Earth*; *88 Reasons Why Christ Will Come Back In 88*; and *Are We Living In the End Times?* all warned of the impending end of the West and of the end of world history. The unstated (and sometimes not so unstated) assumption was (and still is), “if Christianity is in decline here in the West, then that must mean that God is done with world history and Jesus’ return is just around the corner.” And so the conservative church community implicitly fell back on first principles – let’s tell people about Jesus, so they get saved.

2. Conceding objectivity to secularism

The idea that is being promoted here is that “true freedom” necessitates a religious negation as far as the state is concerned, as though freedom can exist without the imposition of morality. Christians have also adopted a separation of state and religion, for the sake of equal treatment for all, allowing secularism to creep further.

“All truth is relative,” we are repeatedly told. “No one can interpret reality independent of the particular culture and ethical context,” it is asserted, except secularism, because it is based on objectivity and the denial of the religious drive.

In such a world, then, it isn’t truth which establishes the “truth,”

but might. Might, you see, is what makes right. And secularists know this better than anyone else, although they strenuously deny it.

Christians have adopted a separation of state and religion, for the sake of equal treatment for all, allowing secularism to creep further.

Gay marriage is right not because it is a human right but because secularists have the political power right now to make it so. But mark my words, as time moves forward so will public opinion, and public views change. In that different time different interpretations of human rights will emerge, and we will see that the secularist-homosexual agenda is ultimately rooted in the shifting sands of public opinion – because human rights in a secular world are ultimately not absolute.

3. The elevation of the state

Finally, there is the political “positivist” view of the state, which simply means that Christians have adopted a view of acquiescence with, if not acceptance of, the state even when it is going against God’s moral order. Evangelical Christians such as John MacArthur base their acceptance of such a state in particular on Romans 13.

Unfortunately, Romans 13 has been the subject of countless exegetical and interpretive distortions that have helped to entrench a passive approach towards political engagement among many Christians. The common thread among these interpretations is the premise that

Paul is teaching Christians that they must remain respectful, submissive, and patriotic even when the government is wicked, because it "is" a minister of God.

One argument is that when Paul wrote the epistle of Romans Nero was emperor of Rome. The historical significance of Nero's reign was that Nero's reputation without dispute was that of a wicked, cruel, and evil tyrant. This significant bit of social contextual information is very important to keep in mind with regard to Paul's assertion that Christians must be willing to support even the most evil of tyrants. However, no one can know for certain whether Paul had Nero in mind when he wrote this chapter, and therefore it should not play such a significant role in determining its actual meaning.

Another argument is that the passage clearly establishes that the government, irrespective of this moral nobility or faith commitment to God, "is" the "minister of God." Thus to rebel against or to protest

the government is to rebel against or protest God. However, the problem with this position is that it falsely attributes "value-laden" substantive – the verb "is" – qualities or characteristics that are personal and specific, rather than corporate and general. Paul uses this same idea with respect to ministers in 2 Corinthians 4:1-2. Here ministers are said not to be perverting the Word of God. He is saying that to be a member of this class of people obligates one to fulfill the identified duties pertinent to the class.

Christianity has removed itself from the public sphere.

Clearly there is much more to this debate and many concerns are not doubt left unanswered. But this discussion is enough to show that our particular theology of the state can encourage a political apathy, when no such basis exists.

In conclusion

Christians have wittingly or unwittingly contributed to the advance of secularism.

By way of the general rejection of reason, science, and the academy, the concession that secularism is capable of rendering objective moral judgments, to the erroneous elevation of the state, Christianity has removed itself from the public sphere. While the discussion has been general, I hope it has painted a picture of Christian apathy – an indifference to society, time, moral-judgments, and the rightful place of the state – which has contributed to the rise of secularism in our world more than any other dynamic.

¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion: In Two Volumes*, ed. John T. McNeil and trans., Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press), p. 11-12. In fact, it was for precisely this reason that the English Parliament called for the Westminster Assembly to draft a confession of faith that the Parliament of England and the Crown would defend.

Introducing the Organizer

The sponsor and organizer of the speeches in this issue of *Clarion* was the Burlington Reformed Study Centre. Established in 1991, this Centre has promoted Reformed, biblical thinking and living by organizing meetings and sponsoring speakers, seminars, and panel discussions on relevant topics to which the entire Reformed community is invited. These meetings are usually held in the fall. The Centre also publishes selective events. In this way, the Centre wishes to make a contribution to equip the saints for their task in church and society. The publications of the Centre are, in order of publication:

- C. Van Dam, ed., *The Challenge of Church Union* (1991)
- J. Mulder, ed., *Marriage and the Family* (1996)
- J. Mulder, ed., *The Challenge of Being Reformed Today* (1999)
- C. Van Dam, ed., *Tinkering With Creation: the Promise and Perils of Genetic Engineering* (2002)
- C. Van Dam and K. Kottelenberg-Alkema, eds., *Work and Leisure* (2004)

All these titles are available from Premier Printing.

For more information, or to suggest topics and speakers for presentations, write to: cvandam@canrc.org

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Influencing for Good

Introduction

Winston Churchill reportedly once said that party democracy is the worst form of government except for all of the others.

Reflecting on the questions provided by the organizers of this evening in their kind invitation for me to address this meeting, I could not help but wonder, "How would we respond to these questions if we asked them in the context of Winston Churchill, World War II, and the stark issues confronting Christian citizens in that time? Would we still regard Churchill with the same respect as I sense most of us do today? Would we have been active supporters of his leadership?"

Many of the questions we will deal with tonight challenge us to reflect on "safe lines" that we – and I include myself – have used for many years to rationalize the lack of political influence which Christians appear to have in Canada today. These include lines such as:

- God calls us to obedience, not success.
- Our involvement and presence in the political arena provides an opportunity to be a Christian example.
- We always need to be ready to provide reason of the hope that is in us; even while politically involved, confessing God before men, letting his Word guide our thinking, and letting our neighbours know of their need of Christ remain priorities for a Christian.

In no way do I mean with any of what follows to diminish the important truths reflected by these familiar statements. I understand the assignment given by the organizers to dig beyond these familiar and safe answers, with which everyone in this room will presumably agree, and examine our strategy and experience relating to public life involvement under a more probing lens. Is the Christian community being good stewards of the opportunity for influence which God in his providence has provided us in this society? Are we being "wise as serpents and innocent as doves" as we go out into the political arena? When we face opposition or defeat, is it because we have been resisted by those who are hostile to the gospel, or are we sometimes as "stupid as pigeons and poisonous as snakes" in our political efforts?

Retreating into the safe sanctuary of church life never seemed a satisfactory answer.

These are stark questions and are more difficult to responsibly answer than they first appear. I presume that we are basically agreed in our basic understanding of scriptural teaching as to why Christians ought to be engaged in public life. The questions before us

are questions of prudence and tactics, not principle.

I will try to be as direct as I can tonight, trusting that you realize that in almost every case, the answer requires nuance and qualification. Wisdom in this matter includes taking account of the circumstances, and when asked what one should do faced with a particular challenge, the answer is almost always "It depends on. . . ." My intention is neither to debate those who differ nor to present my present understandings as the "right" answer, implying that those who come to different conclusions are therefore necessarily wrong. I can readily understand how Christians can responsibly come to different, and sometimes seemingly opposite, conclusions on some of these issues. As I will outline, I view some of these questions quite differently than I once did and as I noted in a published essay related to these matters last year, my understanding of these issues reflects a journey. I can share some lessons I have learned to date, although I by no means am certain that I have arrived at the destination.

I have divided my talk into three distinct parts. First I will provide something of an autobiographical sketch, walking you through some of the significant lessons that I have learned during my twenty-five years as a Christian activist in public life. In the second part, I will identify a few of the critical questions and strategic priorities

which in my mind are among the most important questions the Christian community needs to wrestle with if we are to be an influence for good. In the final part, and it will be the briefest as I will already have made my major points by this time, I will in "rapid-fire" manner work through the questions originally presented and directly respond to them.

I fully understand given the nature of this assignment that it will be impossible for any of us to leave the stage with everyone in the audience fully agreeing with all that was said. I do, however, hope that even those who disagree will acknowledge that "at least he honestly answered the questions," which given prevailing political behaviours in Canada, may in itself be an identifiable Christian contribution to public life.

1. Learning from the journey

I celebrated the twenty-fifth anniversary of active engagement in public life last December. The occasion was the fall of the minority Progressive Conservative government led by Joe Clark over a proposed deficit-reducing gasoline tax. I remember the debate in our grade eight classroom well. "I want to drive a car when I get older" was the critique of my Liberal-sympathetic classmate. "But I want a country to drive a car in," was my response. "Besides, it's unfair and even immoral for us to have to pay the bills being racked up by adults today."

It wasn't very nuanced, but a grade eight world is pretty black and white. Both my classmate and I launched apprenticeships of active involvement in campaigns, attendance at party conventions, and ongoing friendly quarrels. (If political influence was the

objective, he wins hands-down. Today, he serves as a ranking Liberal insider with a senior position on the Prime Minister's campaign team.) My lessons were less career-advancing. I quickly learned enough about the system to know that living in it would challenge my Christian walk.

Our problem is a culture in which mediocrity and hedonism shapes the lives of the citizens.

At the same time, however, it seemed that at least part of the reason the system was that way was because too many Christians were taking the easy way out and leaving a vacuum for others to fill. I remember having a sense of helpless urgency, since there were a bunch of bad guys engaged in politics who had an evil agenda of militant secularization but too few Christians seemed to pay attention to even notice, much less effectively resist them. My first five years of political activity were a time of confusion, learning the ins and outs of political battle alongside some skilled electioneers, and to be perfectly candid, a wonderful time of exhilarating fun. I say with some regret that I although I looked for one, I did not find a mature Christian mentor involved in politics anytime during those teenage years of Progressive Conservative involvement.

These teenaged conclusions made me a ripe candidate for involving myself in the formation of the Christian Heritage Party (CHP) in the late eighties. It made so much

sense. I was convinced that there was a silent majority out there who, if they only knew what was going on, would en masse march to the ballot boxes and use their X's as a weapon of mass protection.

My five years of CHP involvement also provided many lessons. My first responsibilities were internal, as the party was focused on recruiting members and building organizational capacity. I recall some disillusionment as I realized that for many confessing Christians, the politics of earthly cities really didn't matter, since their heavenly citizenship took up all of their available political time. This world was going to burn anyway, so why bother? Others were willing to be engaged, but only using spiritual weaponry. Those of us who advocated using the sophisticated weaponry that is part of contemporary political warfare were by definition less spiritual, less faithful, and therefore not really to be trusted.

Although these challenges were evident from the outset, we soldiered on, inspired by Gideon's story that perhaps God would use our comparative few to defeat the enemy. After five years, a good dose of human sin and weakness combined with the reality of Christian political diversity to become a landmine that ultimately blew up inside of the CHP camp.

A crucial lesson learned during this period was the difference between power and influence. My early apprenticeship in mainstream political parties focused on winning elections and attaining power. Policies were a tool in the battle. They were proprietary and were to be protected lest the enemy steal your good ideas and implement them as if they were their own.

In the CHP, it was different. Politics 101 told me that in a first-past-the-post election system, the CHP could never hope for more than the occasional seat here or there. The political objective was to force other parties to pay attention to our issues. I don't remember how the insight came but I remember repeatedly using the NDP as a model in my CHP promotional speeches. I argued that if one reviews the policies advocated by the NDP at their formation in 1961, and looked at public life today, one could only conclude they had been successful since most of what they had advocated had been put into place in spite of their never having won a national election. With wisdom and sound strategy, I argued, Christians could do the same. Remembering the challenge that the CHP had then – and still has today – of getting the media to pay any attention to it, I can still feel the frustration I felt when a CHP meeting in Guelph received coverage under a prominent heading "NDP Most Successful Political Party." The issue of media bias never changes, but that is a topic for another night.

It is clear to me in retrospect that our efforts in those times were premised on the belief that if properly confronted with the right questions, there was in society a "silent majority" – whether motivated by explicitly Christian or other beliefs – that might be educated and mobilized. While I never bought into the populism that was current in the nineties – some things are true and need to be stood up for whether the majority agrees or not – the CHP model of influence is premised on a grassroots view of changing society.

The next major phase of my journey was in the labour relations arena, where I worked for eleven years as the public affairs director for the Christian Labour Association of Canada. It was in this phase that I came to the seemingly contradictory conclusion that politics was at the same time both more important and less important than I had previously assumed. Change – significant change that touched people's lives and made a difference in how they lived and thought – could be accomplished through other institutions like a labour union, and in a manner that was quite oblivious to the political goings on that captivate junkies like me.

There is a "my-life-is-my-business" mindset which is too prevalent among church members.

Still, there were limits. When a government like the one which held power in BC in 1997 decided to solve certain industry problems through policies that would reward their friends and put independent unions like CLAC virtually out of existence, the only options that could make a difference were political options. Good labour relations may improve the working environment in a given nursing home, but the health policies and funding provisions provided by governments were real limits to what might be done. Legislation that determines the circumstances in which one might join, or leave, a union makes a world of difference to people working in that industry, even those who never contemplate joining a union.

In the process of learning about the interconnectedness of the political and labour spheres, I came to appreciate that sorting through the knots required unraveling strings that had their source in other spheres. The organizational culture of the business, the maturity (or in some cases the immaturity) of the relevant industry association, and the specific characteristics of the client group served often needed to be understood and accounted for if the challenge of the day was to be solved. I might have known this stuff had I read about the enkaptic characteristic of the spheres from people like Kuyper and Dooyeweerd, but being raised Free Reformed, these authors were not on the reading list as some of their other ideas were controversial. So, I learned the validity of some of this theory through experience.

On more than one occasion I wondered whether the overall objective of influencing the ordering of public life to glorify God was a hopelessly naive and futile prospect. Maybe those who isolated themselves from the world, devoting themselves exclusively to Bible study and evangelism, were being better stewards of their resources. A troika of temptations seem to water down the effectiveness of Christian public witness. The pragmatic temptation rationalizes compromise and silences conscience tugs with tactical explanations. The belonging temptation causes one to downplay external piety in order to better "fit in," all of course in the cause of using this resulting relationship influence for good. The mental laziness temptation adopts the solutions conceived in secular policy houses, dresses them up

with a few proof texts and pious principles, and baptizes them as *the* Christian solution to the problem.

Still, retreating into the safe sanctuary of church life never seemed a satisfactory answer. Pragmatism, inconsistency, and a lack of intellectual rigour are on display inside, as well as outside, the church. Besides, to abandon any attempts to influence public life only because the challenge is difficult seemed like the behaviour of the man in the parable who buried his talent. God expects a return on what He has given us and certainly the institutions of public life are part of the creation which must be replenished and stewarded.

Throughout my CLAC decade I continued to dabble (in my personal time) in politics, taking up the cause for candidates and issues that seemed worthy. I honed my skills in the political combative arts such that my son, who is now the age I was when I began my apprenticeship, marvels at my ability to pick causes that seem like long-shots, and finishing in second place (which, he reminds me, is still losing). I worked as a campaign manager for a Christian candidate in 1997. After that election I was inactive until the Alliance leadership campaign of 2000 when I joined in support of Stockwell Day. I was recruited to be a candidate in the 2000 election and I was reminded of another reality of the first-past-the-post system and party politics in Canada. What you do locally doesn't really matter – it is the party, national campaign, and national media coverage that influences Canadian voter decisions. The only impact that the effectiveness of our local campaign

and the effective support we were able to organize from the community at large, but especially the Christian community, was to attract the attention of political organizers at a higher level. We were able to leverage this into playing a role in support of a tax credit for independent schools without strings attached, something that would have significantly enhanced parental choice in education. Unfortunately, even after making progress in that battle and seeing the tax credit implemented into law, the last election saw it removed.

Politics will follow, not lead the change.

Now, after over two decades in the practitioner trenches, my current assignment involves working with a think tank, the Work Research Foundation (WRF). It is a different approach to dealing with public life. Rather than getting involved in partisan political activities and being considered by those who hold office as competitors and political adversaries, we are seeking to advance our arguments through position papers, research reports, media articles, and a journal and encourage politicians and other opinion leaders to deal with our arguments. Our mission statement states our objective clearly: to influence others to a Christian view of work and public life.

So what have I learned during these twenty years of public life involvement? 1) Canada as a whole does not share the perspectives I suspect are generally held in this room, and if the various issues we are

concerned about were put up to a national referendum, we would lose on most issues. 2) There is a significant proportion of the population that does share our concerns, but their voice isn't proportionately considered in the national discussion. 3) The reasons for our lack of proportionate influence have as much to do with our internal divisions and inability to communicate a clear message as they do with a secular hostility to our message, although that is certainly a factor as well.

My present thinking about political strategy has been influenced by interaction with Dr. James Davison Hunter, a professor at the University of Virginia whom WRF has brought to Canada for several speeches, and probably best known for his book *Culture Wars*. His argument, in a nutshell, is twofold. Ideas that have cultural impact are advanced through the core institutions of society to the periphery. They also are advanced through an intersecting network of leaders in various spheres and not by any one institution on its own.

2. Key strategic questions

This brings me to the second part of my talk – identifying some of the core questions and strategic priorities that we face.

Hunter's thesis has challenged my core assumptions. If changing the world matters – and I am theologically convinced that it does – and if it is a sociological fact that cultural change is driven from the top down, not through grass-roots movements of activism, then the network is equally if not more important than the institution. Political parties, while being part of the answer, are much less a part of the answer than I

once thought they were. They are simply tools in the process.

As I survey the current political scene, I must confess to having a far more utilitarian view of political parties and organizations than I ever had before. Our problems are not political parties, lobby groups, or think tanks that are active in the public square. Our problem is a culture in which mediocrity and hedonism shapes the lives of the citizens. And by this, I do not just mean the fact that so many people are evidently not saved and do not lead Christian lives. Even among those who confess Christ, go to church, and even explicitly seek to do politics out of a Christian framework, there is a prevailing attitude of consumerism and mediocrity. So why should we expect government to look any different? I don't like it. I believe our society is on a path towards spiritual – and with it inevitably legal and social – suicide. But it doesn't do us any good to deny the realities of our present environment.

I need to expand a bit on this admittedly stark observation regarding the Christian community. It is more prevalent for Christians to consider themselves victims of social trends. The decline of society is something that we have observed as something that has happened “out there”; something that happens to us as a community. I want to respectfully suggest that the place to start is for the Christian community to take its share of the responsibility. I would argue that this is as much something that has happened by us as it has happened to us.

It is a sweeping generalization to be sure, and there are many exceptions, but it needs to be said. North American Christians in

general are apathetic and hedonistic (using its literal pleasure-seeking definition), and as such are generally satisfied to live in the culture as it is without seeking to effect cultural renewal.

Christians must be involved in diverse spheres.

There is a “my-life-is-my-business” mindset which is too prevalent among church members. Secular notions of authority and community have infiltrated the church. When churches back off their confessions in an attempt to avoid controversy, when the authority of ordained church leaders is ignored by church members and a blind eye is turned to lifestyles that flagrantly contradict what the church stands for, when the sacraments are debased and any transcendent significance lost, then those outside the church have no way of identifying who the church is, much less any reason to pay attention to what is said in the church's name.

Let the church be church

It used to be that the church sat on the main street of each town, with its steeple the highest point. Even those who never set foot in its door were reminded of its presence, even if they chose to ignore everything beyond the here and now. Vibrant churches, while a necessary prerequisite, are by no means a guarantee of a Christian voice in the public square. The lessons of history painfully remind us that some of the most anti-Christian, destructive agendas have advanced while religious life appeared to be thriving. The other

institutions involved in the public square also play important roles. The public square really cannot thrive without any of them.

Churches must practice public theology – regaining a central place on the public square by proclaiming the meaning of the gospel for the common good. Vibrant churches with biblical and confessional grit, sacramental heft, and serious moral discipleship are central to any cultural strategy.

If the essential question before us tonight boils down to: “What strategy would be best to achieve an effective Christian presence in the public square?” the answer starts with a vital prerequisite condition that must be met. There can be no Christian presence in the public square, no matter what strategy we employ and how vigorously we pursue it, if there is no Christian presence in society. It starts, of course, within our churches, but it extends outside of the safe confines of the sanctuary. Are we prepared to be known and held to account as Christians by our neighbours and co-workers? Do others know that we are salty, not because they see us attend the salt shaker, but because they taste the salty flavours whenever we are involved in a business, a community group, a sports team, or a cultural event? “You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet” (Matt 5:13).

This central point – let the church be church, not only within her walls, but also in society – is an essential, and I would argue an overlooked, piece of a discussion regarding Christian public influence.

Pre-requisites are important but only start the conversation. I understand the demands and challenges that church and family obligations place on each of us. I too have served in consistory, on the school board, attend Bible study, and actively participate in the life of the church. But to those who say "that is all that I have time for," I want to challenge you this evening. Paul writes to the Ephesians that God will gather "all things" in Christ, "both which are in heaven and which are on earth" (Eph 1:10). We are called to "bring every thought captive to the obedience of Christ" (2 Cor 10:5). I understand the Great Commission to go into all the world not only refers to the spreading of the gospel geographically throughout the entire world, but "to make disciples" – that is followers of Jesus in their entire lives, not just their religious lives – of all nations, and that certainly includes us. A biblical understanding of discipleship does, I suggest, imply that each of us ought to take seriously some involvement and engagement in public life beyond the walls of the church community.

Allow me to highlight three strategic priorities that need to be considered if we are to see an effective public Christian witness in our society.

Three strategic priorities

The first is that we need to adopt a broader public square approach and not become preoccupied with politics. While politics has its place and is ignored at our peril, it is probably less important as a strategic priority for activity than we sometimes think. Economic realities forced on government by the marketplace, international

trade agreements and alliances, and court-driven approaches to public policy conspire to limit the available choices of our elected representatives. If everyone in this room was elected to Parliament tomorrow and for the next four years we tried to do everything we could to implement a platform that we all felt comfortable with, we would be remembered as nothing more than a curious footnote in history a decade from now, with no meaningful effects of our mandate lasting that long.

Are we prepared to be known and held to account as Christians by our neighbours and co-workers?

Don't misunderstand me. I will continue to be politically active, provide energies and support to worthwhile candidates who are willing to stand for office, and can even conceive of doing so myself again someday. We have been given democratic privileges and an opportunity to make our voice heard, and I strongly believe for us to ignore our citizenship privileges is like taking the talent that God has given us and burying it like the man in the parable. Politics provides an opportunity to have our voices heard and to be counted as participants in society. But in our present circumstances, it is not a place where I expect any significant differences will be made. Politics will follow, not lead the change. As I already noted, our governments reflect our citizenship. The system works, and

since I agree with Churchill's comment that that party democracy is the worst system except for all of the others, I am not going to advocate that we change the system. The logical consequence then, is to argue that it is not politics, but society that needs transformation. We need to think of these questions not as political questions, but as broader public square questions.

The implications of this some may find surprising and even counter-intuitive. It implies that joining the symphony orchestra may be as significant an activity of Christian influence in the public square as is joining a political party. Developing strategies to assist those who are board members of the chamber of commerce or industry association, community association or labour group is as important as signing up everyone each year for their electoral district association. That is not to say political parties are unimportant; it is to say that their importance will be leveraged by activities in other spheres.

Of course, while becoming involved in these activities is a first step, how we exercise our involvement is as important. I would argue every Christian ought to vote, but voting for the wrong things or people hardly helps. Similarly, becoming involved in broader public square activities, but in a manner that is not attentive to providing a Christian influence, is ineffective. I have spoken to non-Christian community leaders who have served on boards or committees with members of the Christian community who were surprised to learn, after many years of working together, that the person was a Christian. The challenge I would

put before each of us is: how does our faith make a difference in the decisions we are asked to make in public life? Do those we serve with know about our faith and perspective, not because we quoted a Bible text or told them we went to church, but by the stands we took or the perspectives we offered on the issues that emerged in our shared work for the public good?

So the first strategy I would recommend this evening is for Christians to be involved in diverse spheres. The building of diverse networks and investing the time necessary to build understandings and relationships of reliability are essential at both leadership and grassroots levels. At an individual level, people need to diversify their involvements where they meet different people. While not everyone can be involved in everything, people should consciously rotate their organizational commitments. It is the rare person who has the interest, aptitude, or energy to develop strong relationships in all of the institutions that are "key" to public life. But if there are five institutions key to public square influence, we need many more three- and four-institution players than we have today. There are two natural consequences that emerge from a conscious effort toward institutional diversification. The first affects our perspective. The ability to look at a problem through various lenses will deepen our understanding of both the problem and result in a far more creative process in proposing solutions. It will also help our communications. The age of broadcasting in which a single newscast or newspaper singularly shaped the environment is over. In an era of narrowcasting,

aided by technological tools that equip everyone to communicate more broadly – even if it is simply forwarding emails to contacts on their contact list – diverse networks are essential to the arsenal required to fight the culture war.

Not only do we need individuals to diversify themselves, but we need forums that bring leaders from these sectors together. Time spent in discussion is necessary in order to bring coherence to a Christian framework of public life that will be communicated through a compatible vocabulary and based on some broadly recognized principles. Today, most Christian organizations are re-inventing the wheels. Existing Christian cultural leaders need to reach out to one another across the divide between the various spheres to develop a common overarching strategy. This can unfold only if new forums are organized for intentional conversation about such a strategy.

It is not enough to be identified narrowly with either sex and family issues or peace and poverty issues.

A second key strategic initiative is to re-brand Christian public square involvement, both among Christians and in public opinion. It is not enough to be identified narrowly with either sex and family issues or peace and poverty issues. While the philosophy, background data, option papers, and alternatives considered in building any platform take many words, the core message is reduced to a simple image or clear slogans.

While most of us would like to think we are more sophisticated than to be influenced by marketing, the truth is that marketing does work. The marketing and "branding" of Christian public square involvement needs some work. For most, Christian public involvement today equates to "sex and family issues," with a secondary brand of "peace and poverty issues" that has carved out its place on the left. Neither is an adequate distinguishing brand. This isn't a call for an advertising makeover or cute slogans. However, "Joe and Mary Public" who drive by the local church and notice its steeple should equate the Christian church with something different from what they do currently if our voice is to be heard in the public square.

The third key strategic priority is for Christians to recalibrate expectations to allow for perseverance over decades of effort, rather than be exhausted by the rollercoaster ride of short-term triumphs and disillusionment. We must gather our strength from the source of our hope and the promise of the gospel. There is simply not enough experience and practical know-how to fill the many crucial positions required. Even today, with the relative dearth of Christian candidates and cabinet ministers seeking and holding office, finding competent staff members to fill out their teams is a challenge. When it comes to the day-to-day tactical and communications skills required to conduct significant campaigns targeted to the general public, our best do not match up against their best. In fact, those who would oppose a Christian voice can go through several rungs on their depth chart before the levels even

out. The only cure for this is time and experience.

Perhaps the most significant challenge will be reorienting expectations and the framework within success or failure as currently evaluated. Although motivating that majority for whom the public square is not on the priority list is the biggest challenge, the expectations of activists also need reorienting. While successes are to be preferred over failures, the battle for public square influence is not dependent on any one policy initiative, election, or campaign. Results will only be measured over decades, and we need to develop the persistence and perseverance to keep at it. The recent debate about redefining marriage is a prime example. It is only in the past few years that there has been anything that even approached a widespread awareness of this issue in the Christian community. For many, this was their first political experience. They became despondent when their petitions, protests, and ballots seemed not to affect the outcome. What is forgotten is that this issue is the culmination of about three decades' very active work by the gay-rights advocacy community. They used a variety of societal institutions and patiently worked, always keeping their longer term objectives in mind. We have some lessons to learn.

3. Answering the questions directly

I promised to finish by directly answering the questions put to us by the organizers, even though the essence of my argument is, I suppose, that these are not the first questions we need to be facing. However, being reliable and

keeping promises is in short supply in the public affairs business, so let me try to make a contribution.

Do keep in mind that I will be direct and cryptic in giving these answers. I trust by this point you realize that full answers would require more nuance and qualification than would make for effective communication. I trust that based on what I have already said, you will be able to fill that in.

I cannot agree with those who suggest that there is a principled obligation for Christians to vote a certain way.

1. How can we make an impact on society around us for good?

First, by having a vibrant church, where the love, holiness, and other attributes of God are on display to the world through his body. Second, by a robust engagement in all aspects of culture by utilizing the various gifts which God has given us, building relationships with those around us, and having the courage to speak out of biblical convictions so that things natural become spiritual, and spiritual things become natural.

2. And what are the most effective ways of influencing the direction of our country?

Through a coordinated strategy in which Christian citizens (a) become involved in the full range of institutions and build wide networks; (b) develop an inter-sphere strategy for cultural

engagement and change; and (c) have the perseverance to pursue this strategy for the longer-term. Influence will only be measurable by decades, not years.

3. What should be our relative priority: think tanks, lobby groups, or political activism via a political party?

It depends. We need all of them, although they are only tools in the process. No specific public square organization (I am obviously not including the church) is a matter of principle.

4. From which method would we get the most mileage?

If we accept the argument that (a) the Christian perspective is a minority perspective and that we are at odds with the prevailing worldview in society; (b) the political process is designed to reflect the views of the citizenry, then direct political involvement is unlikely to achieve change.

5. How can Christians be involved in the political arena with integrity in the most effective way?

With great difficulty, but that is also true of Christians being involved in the business world, cultural world, etc. Taking a long term view, we need those with an interest and aptitude in politics to become engaged now, if for no other reason to begin building within the Christian community the skills and experience required over time for us to have any meaningful political influence.

6. What options are open to us and what standards must we use in deciding how to cooperate with others?

It depends. In some cases, the enemy of my enemy is my friend. In others, there needs to be a much

closer worldview alignment in order to work together at all. Within the long-term strategy, our organizational involvements need to be measured against short-term benchmarks, and cooperation with others can be evaluated against those benchmarks. Keep in mind that public influence requires public organizations, and cannot be viewed simply as an accumulation of private organizations.

7. *Can or should Christians work with others who do not share their faith?*

Yes.

8. *What standards must we use in deciding how to cooperate with others?*

We are always to obey God rather than man. Our involvements with others needs to be measured against defined objectives, and should always be structured to give everyone involved space for us to act out of our most deeply held convictions without violating their conscience.

9. *Some opt for the CHP and others go for the Conservative Party. What should we do and why? The question is urgent given the concerns Christians have about the direction of our country and the political realities in Ottawa.*

The choice to join or not join a political party, and which one, are tactical questions. I cannot agree with those who suggest that there is a principled obligation for Christians to choose one over the other. It might be tactically wise in one set of circumstances to choose one, and in different situation, to choose the other approach. The basis for making this choice requires each of us to weigh the

entire range of issues in the balance of Scripture, and to settle in our own consciences which approach is the most stewardly use of the opportunities given to us for political involvement. As is evident from my own political career, at different times in the past I have viewed both approaches as the most prudent course to follow, and can readily contemplate circumstances in the future in which I might choose to follow either approach again.

Conclusion

I began with citing Winston Churchill and I would like to go back to history in wrapping up my remarks. I take it as a given that we all share a deep concern about the present direction of our country, and a sense that faithful Christians have an obligation always, but especially in present circumstances, to be a salt and light in society. I have tried to provide some thoughts tonight on how this might be done.

Results will only be measured over decades, and we need to develop the persistence and perseverance to keep at it.

I would respectfully suggest that if we would apply the same standards to Winston Churchill that we apply to our present politicians, most of us would regard him quite differently than we do. I am no expert in Churchill history, but most of us know probably as much anecdotal history regarding Churchill as we

do regarding some of the faith commitments and worldviews of some present-day leaders. Yet for the most part we hold Churchill in relatively high esteem for his leadership in difficult times but are prepared to critique present-day leaders who explicitly work out of their faith commitments – all-be-it using strategies with which we might disagree.

I will not comment on the personal faith commitments regarding either Churchill or present day leaders. That is not our focus here. Even those who confess to be Christian sometimes conduct themselves politically in a manner that is unbecoming to their confession, and by God's grace, some who make no faith profession perform valuable service in the public arena that deserves not only our support, but also our appreciation. God accomplishes his purposes through the Cyrus's, the David's, and the Daniel's of this world.

God's kingdom is an eternal kingdom and although we are strangers and pilgrims in the earth, looking forward to the time when we will be at home in the eternal city where there will be no sin, tears, nor disagreement, for now we are called, as Israel was while in Babylonian captivity, to build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat the fruit of them (Jer 29:29); and I might add, to be faithful citizens, rendering to Caesar what belongs to him, and to God what belongs to Him.

May God grant each of us grace, wisdom and courage to exercise this responsibility faithfully to the glory of God, and the betterment of society.

Speech by Ron Gray
Summarized by Allard Gunnink

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the Christian Heritage Party
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Influencing Society for Good

What is good?

If we want to influence our society for good, we need to answer the question: what is this "good" that we want to accomplish? The ultimate source and definition of "good" is what Jesus said, "None is good save One, that is, God" (Luke 18:19). The Bible further informs us that every good and perfect gift comes from the Father of Lights (James 1:17).

Our working definition of "good" is to be found in the oracles of God – and *only* in the oracles of God. Before we can hope to achieve any "good" in society, we must first acknowledge the sole author of all good: the God of the Bible. Jesus said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no man comes to the Father but by Me."

Let me state it flatly: we will not even *begin* to achieve any influence for good in this society until we take a firm and unshakeable stand for the only origin and standard of good: the God of the Bible. We must commit ourselves to the inescapable fact that *we can make no progress towards influencing our society for good until and unless we are willing to lay that foundation stone and to defend its authority.*

Compromise

Many argue that politics is the art of compromise. That is true, but we must know when compromise is possible and acceptable and when it is not. If thirty of us were sitting around the Cabinet table at Ottawa, divvying up the \$186

billion we had just collected from Canadian taxpayers – an outrageous \$18,000 per household, by the way – we'd have to make some compromises between competing demands on the public purse; and we could do so by shifting a few million from this column to that, in response to the needs and arguments expressed. That's acceptable compromise. However, if we hope to influence our society for good, we have to be very clear about our standard of what is meant by "good" and we have to be prepared to defend that position *without compromise.*

We have to be very clear about what is meant by "good."

We in the Christian Heritage Party (CHP) say that we cannot hope to achieve influence for good without a clear and strong commitment to immutable terms of reference. We must not be cowed by the refusal of others to accept those terms of reference. If I have a "life verse" from the Bible, it is Romans 1:16, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ. . . ." In that, I believe I stand closer to the Fathers of Confederation than most other contemporary politicians.

When they were drafting the British North America Act – our first Constitution, and still an integral part of the Canadian Constitution – the Fathers of Confederation debated what to call this new

nation. One morning, Sir Leonard Tilley from New Brunswick came to the conference table at Charlottetown and said, "Gentlemen, this morning in my devotions" (which tells you something important about the Fathers of Confederation: they considered it *normal* for a man to begin his day with devotional study of the Bible) ". . . this morning in my devotions, one passage of Scripture seized my attention; it was the eighth verse of the seventy-second Psalm: 'He' – God's Messiah – 'shall have dominion also from sea to sea. . .'" And Tilley proposed that the new nation be named "The Dominion of Canada," to remind us under whose authority we govern ourselves. His proposal was unanimously adopted by all thirty-three Fathers of Confederation. In 1906, acknowledging the same Biblical source, Parliament officially adopted as Canada's motto "*A Mari Usque Ad Mare*," the Latin rendering of "from sea to sea."

This brings me to a very important point I want to make before this evening is out: many critics of the CHP have accused us of wanting to use the power of government to compel others to believe what we believe. That canard is absolutely false. Rather, our goal is to stop governments and courts from behaving like enemies of the culture that has done more good in the world than any other.

Richard John Neuhaus, editor of *First Things*, wrote in his book *The Naked Public Square* that, while

many dreadful and unbiblical things have been done in the name of Christianity, "on balance, Christianity is the best thing that ever happened to this planet." He's right. The world is indebted to Christianity for universities, hospitals, the principle that all men and women stand equal before the law, the abolition of slavery, democracy as we know it, and many other benefits.

The process

Once we have established our source and definition of "good," and made a commitment to defend it unashamedly, where do we go from there? How do we make progress in our campaign to influence the nation for good?

It is a three-stage process. First, we must develop public policy out of the biblical criteria for good; second, we must articulate those policies in terms that are accessible to both Christian and secular audiences; and third, we must work to have those arguments heard, overcoming a media blackout that implements a distinctly anti-Christian agenda – if necessary, by becoming our own media. Fortunately, the Internet (for all its scummy underside) is also mostly exempt from the climate of censorship that afflicts the old media.

Public policy is developed out of biblical criteria, which precludes utterly the modern Liberal ideology that sets the government in place of God as the source of all good. The mandate of civil government (taken, again, from the Bible) is to be God's minister – that is, *servant* – to you for good; it is to restrain evil and reward those who do good. This leaves a lot of scope for Sphere Sovereignty: the family is, by and large, to be its own arbiter of what is beneficial for its members; the parents, who are accountable to God's overarching

absolute sovereignty, make such decisions. Businesses are free (within the scope of what God allows as just) to determine their own best course of action. Private property (which, because of Mr. Trudeau's socialist bent, was never included in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms) is protected by the commandment against theft. And so on. Yet the supremacy of God – which, happily and providentially, *did* make it through the Liberal/Socialist screen and got into the Preamble of the Charter by one vote – stands over and above all these spheres.

Our biggest challenge is to articulate these policies in ways accessible to secularists as well as believers.

Thus it is that we have arrived at fifty-six pages of policies designed to strengthen the natural, married, two-parent family; to protect children from so-called "education" that is really humanist indoctrination; to ensure labour peace; to eliminate the National Debt; to protect the sanctity of innocent human life and of marriage; to preserve a common day of rest; to protect the environment; to enable the military to defend national sovereignty and to assist in times of natural or civil disaster; and so on. Perhaps our biggest challenge is to articulate these policies in ways accessible to secularists as well as believers.

Same-sex marriage and civil unions

Let me cite a useful example from many recent exchanges about same-sex marriage and civil unions. From Scripture, we have a

clear understanding that homosexual behaviour is a sin. Now, Scripture also tells us that we are all sinners, and that forgiveness and healing from the spiritual effects of sin are available through Jesus Christ if we repent. So we're not saying that homosexuality is a worse sin than any other; and we emphatically do not condone those who attack, demean, or insult homosexuals. But we also understand from Scripture that marriage is a picture of the relationship between Christ and the church, and that conjoining it to something that God calls an abomination is blasphemous. So we take the issue of same-sex marriage very, very seriously. However, when we articulate our opposition, we don't refer to "blasphemy," because that would be incomprehensible to most biblically-illiterate Canadians. Instead, we talk about public policy defects.

Official recognition of same-sex marriage or civil unions implies some degree of government approval for such relationships. That's exactly why homosexual activists have demanded it. You can see it already in most government schools, where acceptance and even approval of homosexual relationships is now mandated from kindergarten to grade twelve. On university campuses approbation of homosexuality has attained the status of Holy Writ. Or more accurately, while Holy Writ is close to being banished on campus, it is being replaced by the homosexual agenda.

Yet the evidence is overwhelming that homosexuality is a treatable psychopathology. Its practices are dangerous and even life-threatening. Therefore, we've tried to bring these facts to light. Any recognition or approval of homosexuality is bad public policy. Implied official approval will

inevitably tempt some adolescents to experiment, and some of those who experiment will become addicted. Anyone who advocates same-sex marriage or civil unions will bear the guilt of sentencing those children to a premature grave. As Christians, we must remember what our Lord said about those "who cause one of these little ones to sin"; we must warn them, whether they want to hear us or not.

So here is the CHP's policy statement regarding homosexuality, same-sex marriage, and same-sex civil unions: "No government has the right to grant recognition or favour to sexually aberrant practices." That's a very simple policy statement; but there are volumes of information and wisdom behind it. The information

behind the policy statement is part and parcel of our campaign to influence society for good. Nothing of lasting benefit will happen to society without policy-makers who consciously recognize and respect the only source of the wisdom that has shaped public life and western civilization for almost twenty centuries.

We must be clear, we must be open, and we must be bold. The times demand a clear voice. "For if the trumpet gives an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself for battle? (1 Cor. 14:8). Too many in the public policy arena have tried to be clever. They have tried to use secular labels and tactics and have given forth an uncertain sound. Psalm 20:7 says, "Some trust in chariots and some in horses" – those are the weapons, the

strategies, and the devices of the world – "but we will remember the name of the Lord our God." That's where the power is to influence society for good.

At a recent conference in Tumbler Ridge, BC, Tristan Emmanuel cited Jesus' introduction to The Great Commission: "All authority in heaven and earth has been given unto Me." *All authority means all authority. All power. Human cleverness and so-called "wisdom" mean nothing in this arena. Trust in God means everything. If we hope to influence this society for good, we'll have to start by truly believing what we say we believe and then act as though we truly believe what we say we believe – without compromise.*

Discussion Questions

"Is it not necessary for a Christian party to have a confessional basis?"

Dr. Oosterhoff responded, in part, by pointing out that historically, the members of the Anti Revolutionary Party in Holland confessed the authority of God and the Bible but had no position on matters such as infant baptism or the marks of a true church, as these matters did not relate to political issues. Church leaders such as Bavinck, Schilder, and Holwerda were right in supporting this view. Members of different denominations can cooperate in politics and a Christian party should have basic scriptural pronouncements but not confessional standards.

"In my experience [in farming organizations dealing with government], to say we can influence from within is a theoretical concept but it doesn't work in practice. When I, as an individual in a meeting with other farmers, express my Christian views strongly, I'm told to leave the room...How can we as a Christian community be more effective?"

Dr. Oosterhoff responded by suggesting that we need to make an alliance with other Christians and work as a group within existing structures or parties. If we are well prepared and express our views intelligently, the others will listen.

"The fact is that the CHP won't win. In the U.S., religious groups work through established parties, think tanks, and lobby groups with some success. Why does the CHP not become an advocacy group and support specific candidates who share Christian views rather than run candidates against such people, and in the end split the Christian or socially conservative vote?"

Ron Gray responded that he believes that the CHP does not take votes away but rather increases voter turnout. It should remain a political party and as the CHP is able to run candidates in more ridings, it will get more visibility and its voice will be heard. We need churches to mobilize the voter turnout, as was done in the U.S. in the last election. The CHP has credible policies and we could do some real good if we can mobilize support.