

THE POWER OF THE REFORMATION IN POLITICAL LIFE

The Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was a movement whose influence certainly was not limited to the personal life of Christians. It left deep traces in public life, including the life of the state. This is especially true of that branch of the Reformation which received its impulses from the city of Geneva. History is a constant testimony of this fact.

We need only point to the activity of Calvin in this city. Although he never assumed a public office there, his influence as a reformer was strongly felt also in the political situation. And this influence was not limited to Geneva, for he maintained intensive relations with other Protestants, e.g., the Huguenots in France, whom he constantly advised with respect to their political activities. The fact that he dedicated his most important work, the Institutes of the Christian Religion, to Francois I, King of France, speaks volumes in this respect.

In fact, in this very work Calvin put great emphasis on the importance of the civil authorities. He wrote that "no man can doubt that civil authority is, in the sight of God, not only sacred and lawful, but the most sacred, and by far the most honourable, of all stations in mortal life" (Inst. IV, XX, 4). During his whole life Calvin fought the Anabaptists, those "fanatics," who took pleasure in unbridled passion and thought that citizens of the Kingdom of God, which has come with Jesus Christ, have nothing to do with civil authority, and that laws and courts were superfluous (Inst. IV, XX, 2).

The spiritual descendants of the great reformer followed in his footsteps. They did not shun the political arena, as the history of Switzerland, France, Holland, Scotland, England and North America in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries proves. The Dutch historian, A. A. van Schelven, has called this period the florescence of Calvinism. In general it can be said that Calvinism, much more so than Lutheranism, has always been closely tied to the life of the state.

It does not come as a surprise therefore, that Calvinism, whenever it flourished, produced not only great theologians but also great jurists. By way of example we can point to the well-known German jurist, Johannes Althusius, who in 1586 became professor of law in the university of Herborn in Nassau, and who was appointed syndicus of the city of Emden in 1604 - a post which he occupied until his death.

Declining Influence

The spiritual decay of evangelical protestantism in the course of the seventeenth century also meant a loss of political relevance.

In some areas of Protestantism this loss was recovered in the nineteenth. A few significant Christian political thinkers can be mentioned: Friedrich Julius Stahl, a converted Jew, and later the great Lutheran legal philosopher and statesman; the well-known Anglican, Edmund Burke, author of Reflections on the Revolution in France; and the Dutch Calvinist, Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer, whose Apostasy and Revolution is still highly important. The latter was a child of the Revival - a return to Biblical Christianity in Scotland, Switzerland, France and Holland.

Both Stahl and Groen van Prinsterer were strongly influenced by romantic idealism, so that their political activities had a rather conserv-

ative slant. They tended to idealize the historically-grown situation. A change for the better occurred in a later generation, especially in Holland, where the political and social relevance of protestantism assumed a distinctly progressive and reformational character under the guidance of men like Abraham Kuyper, Talma and many others. Kuyper became the founder of a Christian political party and was appointed Prime Minister in the first decade of our century.

Between the two world wars Germany also witnessed a Christian social-political movement with strong Protestant backing. However, this was not revived after 1945, at least not in the form of free organizations whose initiative was founded in the faith of believer.

Outside of Holland, where evangelical protestantism has always had a rather strong influence in political life, there are (as far as I know) only small Protestant-Christian political parties in Norway, Switzerland and Indonesia. But when one considers evangelical protestantism of today as a whole, it is no longer a movement which counts in political life. This is true even of those countries where it still represents a large part of the population, as in the United States of America, England and Scotland.

As far as we can determine, this is a result of an individualistic interpretation of the Biblical message so that central elements of this message are lost sight of. For the Gospel is not merely concerned with the salvation and renewal of individual souls. The Gospel redeems the cosmos in its totality.

The Confession of the Sovereignty of God

For on the basis of the Biblical testimony the believer must acknowledge the centrality of the complete sovereignty of God over all of life. Man is permanently defined by this relation of dependence to God, his Creator (Ps. 139, Acts 17). Scripture teaches that man attempted to be like unto God, but this attempt is his radical fall into sin. For God remains Lord also over rebellious man. Even the powers of darkness are constantly instruments in His hand. Satan himself, the prince of the kingdom of darkness, cannot escape his creatureliness (Isa. 10;45; 54; Rom. 8:31-39).

This means that after the fall of man in Paradise, God did not surrender His creation into the hands of Satan. No, contrary to that, God did not leave the world to itself. He walked the way of reconciliation by sending His only begotten Son into the world in the form of a man so that He might bear the wrath of God in His unfathomable suffering in order to atone for man's boundless guilt. In this Christ became a Mediator between God and man, between God and the world as created and ordered reality. Christ is simultaneously redeemer and re-creator (Rom. 8; Eph. 1:15-23; Col. 1:16-20).

Thus, according to Scriptural-reformational persuasion, the theme of creation, fall and redemption through Jesus Christ in the communion of the Holy Spirit is the all-controlling theme of world history. This immediately implies that the absolute lordship of God over the world is executed through the Person of His Son Jesus Christ. All human activity thus demands a radically-Christian motive. No area of life is with drawn from the power of Christ, the Son of God (Matt. 28:18; 1 Cor. 1:10-31). This means that in political life the Christian may be concerned with nothing but the recognition of divine authority as this has been revealed anew in Jesus Christ. The Christian may not accept any norms except those which God has ordained for the life of the state. For the Christian, this

involves a battle which the Bible predicts: the fight against sin in his own life and against sin in the liferelationships in which he is placed (Gen. 3; Eph. 6, etc.).

Man as God's Co-laborer

For man is not a mere victim of the stream of history. Rather, he has been given a will, understanding and the power to act. With Holy Writ we can even say that man is God's co-laborer. The Lord of the universe has allowed him to partake of His authority. God blessed man in Paradise, saying to him, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth" (Gen. 1:28). God here assigns to man a definite authority over the world which, as experience proves, has come to expression only in a limited way as a result of sin.

Abraham Kuyper has repeatedly pointed to the fact that also in human society one never directly meets the authority of God Himself, but that this authority appears in the office of human persons who do not derive this authority from themselves but exercise it only as representatives. This authority can be found in many areas and in many forms in such a way that it always has its own particular character.

Because all human authority is derived from God and has the nature of "office," assignment, task, it has an implicitly limited character. It is always bound, subject to specific divine ordinances which are rooted in God's creative will. As such they have the quality of permanence and constancy. This does not mean that these ordinances are static. Rather, they are dynamic instruments in the hand of God by means of which He rules, guides and propels His creation, including all social relations. They are universal, i.e., they hold for all men, also for those who reject God and his law. These divine ordinances determine the structure of the social reality within which man lives, and in this way they condition man himself in all his strivings, purposes and ideals.

The State and Sin

This means that the life of the state, in all of its dynamic development and expansion, in every variety of form, is still bound to a constant structure or order which is based in the order of creation. This structure posits itself with an inner authority for the simple reason that God cannot be avoided, nor His law as He expressed it in His creation-order and as He maintains it in the face of rebellious man. For this reason a revolutionary or totalitarian state, simply in order to maintain itself as state, will have to absorb within itself certain elements of this structure. Otherwise it will degenerate into an organized band of robbers which will irrevocably dissolve itself. Since all human authority is limited, the state is not an all-embracing power but only one of the many life-spheres which takes its place in the complex of human society. As a result of this the authority of the government as it appears in the state has its own peculiar character. In this respect it does not differ from other forms of authority: of the father in the family, of the entrepreneur in business, of the teacher in school, of the office-bearer in the church.

Calvin posited a close relation between the government and sin. He claimed that governments act as servants of righteousness. In this they appear as God's representatives. And for this purpose they are given the power of the sword. Since governments are clothed with divine authority,

people are called to render homage and subjection. And such respect is due "not only to the authority of those princes who honestly and faithfully perform their duty toward us, but all princes...although there is nothing they less perform than the duty of princes" (Inst. IV, XX, 20).

A similar teaching is found in the Confessio Belgica, where we read "that our gracious God, because of the depravity of mankind, has appointed kings, princes, and magistrates" (Article XXXVI). Both Calvin and the Confessio Belgica represent the view of Scripture here (cf. 1 Sam. 24:7; 26:9; Rom. 13; Eph. 6:1; Pet. 2:13-18).

Government and the People

All of this implies that the government has authority which is not derived from the people (the doctrine of people's sovereignty). Nor is this authority derived from the government itself so that it could exercise it in harmony with its own will (the doctrine of state-sovereignty). The Biblical view is that the government has received its authority and power from God and must use it in conformity to His law.

There is not first of all a "people" to which is added a government in some external manner. Nor is there primarily a state which, as it were, absorbs its subjects within itself (Fuehrer-Prinzip). Both government and the people, each on their own, occupy an inalienable place in a modern, differentiated state. Together they are responsible for the development of the life of the state.

Only in this way can democracy be properly appreciated. For democracy is above all that form of state-organization within which the citizens ("the people") have the opportunity to determine and influence the policies of the government in freedom according to their own convictions.

The so-called "democratic liberties" thus concern those rights which the citizens may exercise in the political arena, in the life of the state. They are not "absolute", and have no validity over against the state. Their range is wholly defined by the form which the state has assumed in a specific period of history. From this perspective it is impossible to posit democracy in a formal sense as a general condition for every type of state. For a well-functioning democracy presupposes a certain political maturity, a certain feeling of responsibility on behalf of the citizens before they can formulate responsible judgments about the most fundamental principles which they think should guide the government in its decisions. Right here we find the first task of political parties: the creation of a responsible public opinion with respect to the life of the state.

Democracy thus represents spiritual freedom in politics. And especially the evangelical Christian must defend this freedom, not on the basis of some sort of humanistic idea of tolerance which equates and levels all religious convictions, but on the basis of the conviction that the government (also with respect to the spiritual life of its subjects) is in principle limited in power - by divine ordinances which it cannot neglect with impunity.

The Responsibility and Task of the Christian

The Christian may therefore never shun his responsibility in political life. The Apostle Paul admonished the church "that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgiving be made for all men, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life, godly and respectful in every way" (1 Tim. 2:1,2). But, while for the believer

there can be no work without prayer, so also there can be no prayer without work. As subjects we are duty-bound by word and deed to support and help the government in the fulfilment of its highly important task.

In order to accomplish this, it is first of all necessary that the indifference with respect to political life among evangelical Christians make place for a sense of active involvement. For only then can we truly become a blessing also in public life for our fellow-men. It is important to notice here that Paul, immediately after mentioning the words quoted above, adds, "This is good, and it is acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. 2:3,4).

Our concern must be to make the message of Christianity, the message of the Bible, relevant to public life. The leavening influence of the believer must be felt here as well as in the church and on the mission field. This influence finds its only possibility in the Covenant which God has made with this world, with His People, and finds its only ground in the conversion of man to God.

It must be emphasized here that in the development of Christian political thought and action we are not merely interested in a few special subjects, but in the inner reformation of political life itself. This will make a fundamental re-thinking about the typical structure, the peculiar nature and the specific task of the state - in the light of the Bible - an urgent necessity among evangelical Christians. Our concern must center around the basic principles which ought to guide the government and the people in their mutual activity.

Reflection, however, is not enough. Our ultimate goal must be the reformation of political life itself. The principles here mentioned must be carried out with power and conviction in the nations where we live and over against the governments under which we are placed.

We are fully aware of the fact that the possibilities for this are greater in one country than the next. In a democratic state we will be able to use the rights of freedom of speech and press in order to express our opinions. Then there is the possibility of forming a political party within which evangelical Christians can come together to exert a joint reformational influence on the political process. This possibility will depend in large measure upon the potentialities of reformationally-minded Christians in the respective countries. But we must not, with an eye to tradition and present fact, immediately think that this is impossible. Reformation challenges traditions and situations with the Word of God. Moreover, history shows again and again that a small movement, started in faith, may grow into a mighty force. The outcome here may well depend on the strength of Christian conviction.

The position of the Christian in a totalitarian regime is, of course quite different. For he can hardly move about in the political arena, since he is faced everywhere with the all-embracing power of the State. Still, he is not without perspective in political life. For he knows - as we already noted earlier - that even totalitarian forces are wholly enclosed within God's omnipotence. And he can become a witness of that divine sovereignty as long as God grants him life, even in the face of totalitarian governments, as Christ remained such a witness also when He, forsaken by all, stood before Pontius Pilate (John 19:11).

For in the confession of this sovereignty lies our comfort, but also our strength - in all times, under all circumstances.

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