

Politics: For the Sake of Power?

Can a Christian political party function with Integrity? Will it not succumb-eventually-to the temptation to seek power? Is politics Machiavellian by its very nature?

The Italian Nicole Machiavelli (1469-1527) saw politics as an arena or field of pure power. To reach their goal, politicians may use any kind of means – moral or immoral. Through his study of history, Machiavelli had learned that treachery, bribery, the breaking of treaties and violence guaranteed success. A politician must understand that all people are evil, and most of them are stupid. I fear that Machiavelli's view is still prominent today. Too many use their power to manipulate people to achieve their objectives. Perhaps we could use the word "coerce." The distinctive quality in politics seems to be the struggle for power. This is true not only on the national, but also on the international scene. No wonder political parties have often received a bad press. "Party is the madness of many, for the gain of the few," wrote Jonathan Swift over 250 years ago. "The one pervading evil of democracy is the tyranny of that party that succeeds by force or fraud in carrying elections," wrote Lord Acton 75 years ago. "Political parties are the curse of today's parliaments," wrote Canadian journalist Harold Greer in 1972. For example, in 1972 the Liberal government used raw power to ram through its foreign takeover bill. Dozens of organizations and individuals wanted to appear before the parliamentary committee. Opposition members were in no hurry. The government majority knew what to do. On June 8th they jammed through a series of motions. They decided not to hear from provinces or individuals. They decided to listen to Minister Herb Gray and a couple of groups. They limited the total time for hearing witnesses to five days. The government had its way, and the bill was through parliamentary committee and back in the House of Commons in fourteen days. "A railroad," Conservative Stan Schumacher called it. And raw political power is still very visible today.

In an interview, the Hon. Deborah Grey, Reformed Party MP for the Beaver River, Alberta riding, was asked, "What, in your opinion, are the root issues facing us as a country?" She replied, "First and foremost, the eroding of Christian values. We're even considered a post-Christian nation. That frightens me. Canada has always been a country of God-fearing people. I'm frightened to see people in government more concerned with power than with people. The common people are not listened to.,, On the international scene nations are pitted against nations for the preservation of their self-interests. The Argentinian Mariano Grondona, stated boldly that the "new world," in which we live today, "is a world in which each nation, large or small, is bent on obtaining the greatest advantage for itself. National interest stands first in the scale of values."

The struggle for power should be repugnant for the Christian. Power struggles dehumanize. People become objects for gain; to be controlled rather than served; pawns in a political game rather than God's unique image bearers with specific needs. But, may Christians not use power to achieve their goals? Don't we have the solutions to the dilemmas of peace and justice, requiring only that we grasp the reins of power,

wrenching them away from the secularists? Too many think that as long as their motive is worthy, they can use power without fear. But it doesn't work that way. Gerard Pelletier, Secretary of State during the October (1971) crisis, remarked, "Authoritarianism is the temptation of power; alarmism that of opposition." Power tends to corrupt. John Calvin feared the abuse of power. That's why he opposed social as well as political concentration in the hands of a few. The Christian faith is antithetical to the grasping of earthly power. Christians are followers of Christ the King, who became a servant, even washing the feet of His disciples (John 13:14, 15). The values of the Kingdom of God are upside down values; low is high, weak is strong. Christian politics can never be Machiavellian. It is the politics of powerlessness, reflected in a profound example in the person and ministry of Jesus, who could say, "All power is given unto Me." He never manipulated nor coerced. He became the least for the sake of His people. He reluctantly accepted the role of suffering servant. He was tempted by Satan to grasp earthly power, but rejected it.

Cheryl Forbes comments, "Jesus had a ministry of powerlessness. The verse in Zechariah, 'not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord Almighty' (4:6) certainly applies to the life of Christ. He took as His purpose the words from Isaiah 61:1-2. His message in the Beatitudes was aimed at the powerless: the poor, the sorrowful, the meek, the pure, the peacemakers, and the persecuted eventually will receive great reward. Each of these categories is antithetical to the pursuit of power."

Christian politics is not the politics of power, but of sacrifice, discipleship and-service.

Johan D. Tangelder
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