

Christian Political Responsibility

Dr. John Stackhouse Jr., associate professor of religion at the University of Manitoba, claims that political movements such as the Christian Heritage Party, which aim to "recall" Canada to a Christian heritage, remain on the fringes of evangelicalism, let alone of the society as a whole. Judging by the election results since the 1986 registration of the CHP as a federal party, Dr. Stackhouse Jr.'s claim is correct. The CHP has not gained much support from either the evangelical or even the Reformed communities.

In 1986 former CHP leader Ed VanWoudenberg stated that the CHP chose its name "with the express purpose of reminding all Canadians that from the time of Confederation we have a heritage that has shaped our country, formed the basis of our laws and Constitution, determined the course of Canada's history and influenced the development of our culture and education."

The late Rev. Lassie Tarr, prominent evangelical author and associate editor to *Faith Today*, wrote a typical evangelical response to the founding of the CHP. He sincerely hoped that it would be able to make "a positive contribution to the barren landscape of Canada." Yet Tarr believed that Christians should make their influence felt within existing parties. And he said of the CHP's call for a return to Canada's Christian heritage, "Those who seek to summon us back to our Christian heritage are on the right track. Careful examination, however, would reveal that our Christian heritage does not ever include a political party that laid claim to being the Christian political party. Rather, it includes a body of individual Christian believers who functioned as salt and light in their society and make their Christian witness count in that society and its institutions." VanWoudenberg and Tarr agreed on Canada's Christian heritage; but they differed on the way Christians should be involved in politics. And this difference is crucial to our understanding of the lack of evangelical support for the CHP.

Our Christian heritage

Canada's roots are Christian. In the 19th century Canadians linked the progress of Christianity with the advance of civilization. It may be properly regarded as a "Christian century." After Canada became a nation in 1867, Leonard Tilley of Fredericton, New Brunswick, a political leader and a Methodist, applied the words of Psalm 72:8 to the new country: "He shall have dominion also from sea to sea." The vision of Canada as "His Dominion," a nation embodying Christian principles, loomed large. Yet Canada was not as much a Christian nation as two Christian nations, Catholic and Protestant.

In 1911 more than 95 per cent of Canada's population had a church connection; and in Newfoundland in 1901 it was nearly 100 per cent. Protestant Christianity in British North America displayed a remarkable vigour. The Christian faith had a tremendous influence on education. Schools - from elementary to university - owed their existence directly to the church. In most of the provinces, as late as 1890, the majority of the schools were

under control of various denominations and had religious instruction as part of their curriculum. Egerton Ryerson, leading Methodist spokesman of Upper Canada (Ontario), never intended a public school system without a Christian foundation. The church historian Kenneth Scott Latourette notes that "even in Ontario, where the schools were undenominational, prayer and reading of the Bible were part of the procedure and the clergy were empowered to make arrangements for the teaching of religion." And historian Donald Creighton described Canada of the first two decades of the 20th century as "a Christian, or, at least a church-going society."

How times have changed! By the end of the 1920s the church had lost the battle for the heart and soul of Canada. Dr. Sinclair-Faulkner, a United Church layman and historian, observed that during the 1960s Canadian Christendom started to come apart. He wrote, "Previously a 'Christian country,' Canada became, by act of Parliament, merely a country 'founded upon principles that acknowledge the supremacy of God.' Public schools whose charters called for the formation of 'Christian citizens' dropped religious instruction and replaced it with teaching 'about religions,' with 'values education' or with nothing at all. Departments of religious studies appeared on university campuses, and departments of theology dwindled." Immediately after World War II as many as two-thirds of Canada's population were in church on a given Sunday, well over 50 per cent in the mid-sixties, and in the late 1980s only slightly more than one-fourth. In 1960, 40 per cent of the population reported reading the Bible at least once a week. In 1980 it was less than 10 per cent. Secularism has moved our entire society away from its traditional religious practices. And Quebec, once staunchly Roman Catholic, moved the fastest.

Christianity and politics

In Canada there used to be a correlation between religious and political allegiances. To a certain extent this is still true today. Church historian Mark Knoll observed that in 1985, Roman Catholics, both in Quebec and in other regions, were more than twice as likely to support the Liberal Party than were Anglicans, adherents of the conservative Protestant denominations, or members of the United Church. He said that the latter, in turn, were more than twice as likely as Catholics to identify with the Progressive Conservative Party. Support for the socialist New Democratic Party was more than three times greater among members of the United Church than among Quebec Catholics, and it received even greater favour from those who were not members of any religious group.

Although Rev. Tarr was technically correct when he said that there was no political party in Canada that ever laid claim "to being the Christian political party," Christians have been involved in the founding of parties with a religious perspective. In the 1930s William Aberhart, fundamentalist radio preacher and head of the Prophetic Bible Institute, who had a wide following, championed Social Credit. The party consolidated its hold by giving Alberta a reasonably honest and efficient administration and retained its power even after Aberhart's death in 1943. Premier Ernest Manning, the father of Preston Manning, like his predecessor Aberhart, was also a radio preacher.

The Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), which eventually became the New Democratic Party, sought to develop a socialist alternative to capitalism. The CCF presented its social doctrine as in keeping with the social teaching of the churches. In the 1930s the Social Gospel had a considerable impact on the Protestant population. (The Social Gospel advocates wanted to build a more just society, believing that the transformation of society is part of man's divine destiny. The New Jerusalem could come through human effort.) The acknowledged leader of the new party was James Shaver Woodworth, a former Methodist preacher who had turned social reformer. Mark Knoll notes that while Woodworth served as superintendent of the Methodist All People's Mission in north Winnipeg from 1907 to 1913, the mixture of evangelical faith and compassionate social outreach he tried to promote was typical for his day. He was deeply committed to the Biblical idea of justice.

Current Christian politics

In the 1990s Canada witnessed attempts to form political movements with Christian values. One of them, the Reform Party, made considerable headway in the West. It has attracted the support of many Christians of evangelical and Reformed persuasion. Its leader, Preston Manning, is a well-known evangelical who has often hosted his father's National Bible Hour. Deborah Grey, the party's first member of parliament, speaks openly about God's guidance in her life. However, the evangelical presence in the Reform Party does not show in its constitution. It does not contain any reference to God or Christianity. It does not even have an official stance on abortion or euthanasia. In an interview Manning said that his party does not have an explicit Christian agenda. It comes mainly from a populist political base by asking people what ought to be on the political agenda. Manning seems to have divorced his private faith from his public policies. I am thinking particularly of euthanasia. Personally he has very serious moral reservations about euthanasia, but he has also publicly stated that he will vote for whatever position his constituents take on this issue. Paul Marshall, senior member in political theory at the Institute of Christian Studies in Toronto, opines that the Reform Party has little Christian character. He sees it, and I believe rightly so, as yet another secular party which might contain some features that appeal to Christians.

Another new political movement is the Christian Coalition of Canada. It hopes to become Canada's counterpart to the very influential and rapidly growing Christian Coalition in the US. It does not intend to become a political party. Rather, it is issue-oriented and wants to mobilize Christians at the grass root level, lobbying members of parliament and provincial legislatures regarding family, abortion and euthanasia concerns.

Politically motivated evangelicals still talk about infiltrating existing political parties. Recent history has shown that this is extremely difficult. Members in parliament must adhere to their party platform and be loyal to their caucus. Liberal MP Dan McTeague states that the "powers that be" believe MPs are in Ottawa more as numbers on the Liberal rollcall sheet than as representatives of their constituents. McTeague says that you have to toe the line and if you don't, you risk being ostracized. What I found

particularly disturbing is his statement that there is no place for strong moral convictions in the Chrétien government.

Should Christians seriously consider infiltrating secular political parties? I suggest that through party membership, they also support the party's platform. If the platform has no Christian basis, Christians support, by their membership, a political confession which opposes their own.

The lack of evangelical involvement

If Canada has known Christian political involvement in one form or another, why is it so difficult to get today's evangelicals involved in politics, let alone in the CHP?

One of the major reasons is the dualistic worldview of many evangelicals. This dualism has led to a division of spheres; a sharp line is drawn between the sacred and the secular. Years ago I saw the same slogan on the side of a small shed somewhere in British Columbia, as well as on the wall of a large building in Manila, the Philippines: "Christ is the Answer." A well-meaning confession, but to what is Christ the answer? What are the questions? What were these Christians thinking of when they painted their slogan on the wall of a shed and a building? They were thinking mainly in terms of man's eternal destiny, his peace of mind and interpersonal relationships. They were not thinking of Christian involvement in the public sphere.

How do evangelicals relate to politics? Their relationship may be regarded in the following ways:

1. The Christian should take a stance against politics.

A Christian is not permitted any involvement in politics whatsoever. Until recently the Mennonites and their more extreme wing, the Amish, have concluded that they must be totally separated from the world, as all efforts to reform all of life and society are pretentious folly. They focused on separation from the public sphere. This view has made its impact on the larger evangelical community.

Numerous devout Christians claim that Christians should not get involved as all politics is dirty business. How should we react to this claim? No member of parliament is perfect. Elected officials simply reflect the general morality of the country. And not all government officials are corrupt. Gross generalizations should be avoided. In every level of government there are hard-working and honest elected officials. We can't condemn a whole bushel of apples because one is rotten. Because the belief that "politics is a dirty business" is so popularly ingrained, Christians should show that the opposite can be true.

Another reason advanced for not being involved in politics is evangelism. Some say that soul-winning is the Christian's only business. They claim that politics will distract from evangelism. Certainly we must take this concern seriously. But if we live in the power of

the resurrection, both politics and evangelism are ways of serving God. We don't have to divorce the one from the other. William Wilberforce (1759-1833) was a leading social reformer, known for his relentless effort to abolish the slave trade. He was also burdened for all who didn't know the Lord. He said, "O remember, that the salvation of one soul is of more worth than the mere temporal happiness of thousands or even millions." This prominent member of the British parliament supported both home and world missions. England's famous preacher, Charles H. Spurgeon (1834-1892), was not only active in reaching the unsaved, but he also founded schools for poor children and almshouses. He also made occasional commentary on education, war (which he strongly opposed) and Irish home rule. He also opposed slavery in America, which cost him his influence in the southern United States. Wilberforce and Spurgeon made the Gospel visible and credible.

In addition, many evangelicals believe that Christian involvement in politics is a waste of time since the Lord is going to return soon. They say, "We are living in the last days. Society is on the downgrade until the end of time. Only Christ's return can permanently right the world's wrong." And they state that as Christ's followers they have withdrawn from politics and culture in general so that they can be ready for His coming.

But this position is not scriptural. Though we wait with eagerness for our Lord's return, we cannot avoid being stewards of His world. Our union with Christ must lead to love for this world, a world which God created, sustains and continues to love. A spirituality which withdraws from the world and reduces Christianity to private worship and inner experiences, short-changes Scripture. The promised hope of glory should encourage us to minister in every sphere of life. As Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, who were so eagerly awaiting the Lord that they quit work, "If a man will not work, he shall not eat.... and as for you, brothers, never tire of doing what is right."

2. The Christian should take up a position alongside politics.

Some evangelical Christians believe that being a Christian and practicing politics are two different issues. A Christian may be a politician, but his Christianity should have no bearing on his political philosophy. The Christian faith and politics are two separate entities. Faith is a private matter and should stay out of the public domain. God belongs to the spiritual world. The affairs of this world and faith don't mix.

The privatization of faith has been defined by Os Guinness as that "process by which modernization produces a cleavage between the public and the private spheres of life and focuses the private sphere as the special arena for the expansion of individual freedom and fulfillment."

This trend toward privatization was evident to historian Theodore Roszak who, after travelling through the United States, remarked that the Christian faith in America was "socially irrelevant, even if privately engaging."

What Roszak said about the privatization of the Christian faith in the United States can also be applied to Canada. As a matter of fact, given the moral drift in Canada, the decline in church attendance, the media hostility towards the Christian faith, the lack of Christian influence upon public life, one wonders what has happened to believers. A major opinion poll found that 74 per cent of Canadians call themselves Christian. Roughly two-thirds of Canadian adults believe "that Jesus Christ is the divine son of God, was resurrected to eternal life, and did so that mankind's sins could be forgiven." Where are all these believers? Many of them seem to have accepted the ideology that Canada is a multicultural nation, and so your religion is not better than anyone else's. The result of this privatization of faith makes the "truths" of any faith - including the Christian faith - simply a matter of personal preference.

But if Christ is Lord of all, privatization of faith is impossible. Since the Christian's duty is to the Lord rather than to man, he has the task to make a difference for Him - also in public life. Christianity cannot be placed "in the category of private opinion, which a man may cherish but by which he must not seriously guide his civil behaviour." Neither the Old Testament prophets nor the apostles separated their faith from their passion for justice in the political sphere. The divorce between private faith and public life is a sign of the times. When Christians refuse to move into the political realm they prove how trapped they are by the secular spirit of modernity.

Secularists do not have a private faith. They openly assert their faith. They don't hide their secular opinions. They legislate their morality. They impact the nation from their perspective, firmly held and openly declared. Christians are mandated to apply Christian principles to all of life. They are to engage in political affairs to the utmost of their ability. They invade the political arena with a political philosophy which affirms scripturally grounded principles.

3. Civil religion: the liberal Christian tries to baptize political life.

According to this viewpoint, Christians must give religious support to the nation's political identity and ideals. The interest of one's nation or of a particular region are identified with the concerns of God. Mark Knoll defines civil religion as "the sense of mingling of ultimate allegiance to the universal standards of Christianity with the particular values of a person's nation, region or way of life." In other words, it is faith in one's nation. In Canada it means having a secular faith in Canada itself. Civil religion says, "right or wrong, this is my country." But civil religion and the Christian faith are not identical. Christians are called upon to advance God's transnational kingdom. Though we love our country, we are always Christians first, living in obedience to our Creator God and Redeemer.

Transforming and renewing politics to serve God.

Christians can't leave political engagement to others. Dr. Carl F. Henry, the dean of evangelical theologians, criticized his fellow evangelicals for their reluctance

to get politically involved. He remarked that unless they deploy political power to promote just social objectives, evangelicals tend to rely only on moralistic sermonizing and divine providence to achieve their goals. Henry also recognized the need for political parties. The very fact that political decisions are made institutionally necessitates the existence of parties, whether this is acknowledged or not.

As I have shown, historically political views were shaped by the Christian faith. For the good of our nation, we need to return to our Christian heritage. It is time that Christians join hands and work together for renewal in our nation. For this purpose the CHP was founded. It is neither a right-wing nor a left-wing party. It seeks to base its political platform on the teachings of the Bible. Therefore, it cannot be and never has been a one-issue party. From its very first pages the Bible supports the rights of the burdened, the downtrodden, the alienated and the poor. It emphasizes that we owe love to all persons, including the unborn and physically and mentally handicapped, and that we ought to reach out in love and justice to the oppressed and outcasts.

Members of the CHP do not flee from the world in order to serve the Lord. They do not privatize their faith nor do they accept the agenda of civil religion. Their aim is to serve God - also in Canada's political arena.

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February, 1996