

Politics, Reason for Optimism

In 1619, Francis of Sales wrote to someone subjected to criticism "Take good care not to fall into any discouragement when you are murmured at or criticised a little ...I assure you that the business of finding fault is very easy and that doing better very difficult." I was reminded of Sales' advice as I reflected on the last election results.

The Christian Heritage Party did not gain a seat in the House of Commons. The undemocratic "first past the post" system makes it difficult for small, principled parties to make electoral gains. However, if Canada would have had Proportional Representation, our Party would have had one seat.

How do we react to the election results? Are we going to succumb to discouragement and fault finding? Or are we going to learn from the experiences gained during the election campaign and work hard to strengthen our Party? I am convinced that we may not give up on the ideal of a Christian political party. We can't let the opposition set our agenda or squash our vision.

We know that our Canadian culture seems to take the position that the Christian faith should not be taken seriously - even by those who profess to believe in it. Religion is seen as a hobby - trivial and unimportant for serious people. Christians are supposed to keep their faith in God a secret. It is not supposed to have any bearing on politics. What the American scholar, Stephen.L.Carter, wrote in his book *The Culture of Disbelief*, is also applicable in our situation: "..... our public culture, more and more, prefers religion as something without any political significance, less an independent moral force than a quietly irrelevant moralizer, never heard, rarely seen."

Political candidates who profess to be practicing Christians are treated with suspicion by the mass media or accused of bigotry. When Reform Leader, Preston Manning told *Globe and Mail's* Jan Wong that he believed that Jesus Christ is the only Truth and the Life, and in a hell for those who do not accept Christ as Saviour, Ellie Teshler of the *Toronto Star* called him bigoted and unfit for public office.

Some of the most articulate media personalities in the country are oddly tongue tied when the Bible is brought up. Major newspapers encourage reporters to acquire expertise in law, economics or sports, but I don't know any Canadian editor requiring journalists to brush up on their theology. In our secular age, the media are willfully ignorant about the Christian faith. When reporting on religious matters, it seems too much to ask journalists to read the Bible in order to understand the Christian Heritage Party or Preston Manning's evangelical view of salvation. Christians and secular journalists no longer speak each other's language.

Contrary to the thinking of secular pundits, religious belief is a vital factor of life, especially within religions which offer clear guidelines for right and wrong. The Dutch Christian statesman, Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer (1801-1876) rightly called religion "a life principle that ought to be united and interwoven with our entire existence."

Religion is not for Church only, it is one's driving force and motivator. This means that one's faith, whether secular or Christian, influences one's politics. And, regardless the media given impression that religion is a hobby, more people go to Church in any week than to all sports events combined.

One would expect, therefore, that something so important to Canadian Christians would affect their behaviour as voters. As a matter of fact, it did in the past. We do have a Christian political heritage on which to build. The Bible makes it abundantly clear that Christians do have a political responsibility. The Gospel does not divide life into sacred and secular spheres. It teaches the absolute Lordship of God over the world, executed through the Person of His Son, Jesus Christ. All human activity, therefore, demands a faith orientation. No area of life is withdrawn from the power of Christ, the Son of God (Matt.28. 18. 1 Cor.1. 10-31) This means that the authority of Christ must be recognized also in the sphere of politics.

Since we still have the freedom to articulate a Christian political vision, it is necessary that the indifference, with respect to political life, among many Christians, makes place for active involvement. Only then can we be truly a blessing to the nation. Dr. Carl. F. Henry, the Dean of Evangelical theologians, rebukes his fellow Evangelicals for their reluctance to get politically involved. He writes

"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's rebuke should be taken to heart. Politics divorced from the Gospel will not solve the nation's pressing problems in the fields of prison reform, education, poverty and so on. We must emphasize that the CHP is not a one issue party. In the development of political action, we are not merely interested in a few pertinent issues, but in the inner transformation of political life itself. With our eyes focused on the current political situation, the task seems impossible, but nothing is impossible with our Sovereign God. In our nation, we can still use the . freedom of speech to convey our beliefs to the Government under which we have been placed. We must continue to challenge it with the claims of the Word of God. We should remember also that we are not called to be outwardly successful, but to be faithful in our political vocation. Groen van Prinsterer pointed out already in 1832 that the Gospel has nowhere promised that the good cause will always triumph here below, and, he wrote then, "we need only glance at history or look about us to discover that evil often triumphs, even for long periods."

Yet, history also shows again and again, that a small movement, started in faith, may grow into a mighty force. The rise of the Dutch Christian political movement is a prime example. Groen van Prinsterer became a member of the Second Chamber of Parliament, where he carried on his campaign for Christian historical principles, while expounding his views in numerous publications. He became known for his long fight for the freedom of education. His campaign for the "school with the Bible" became a decisive factor in Dutch politics.

In 1871, he left the Conservative Party to form the Anti-Revolutionary Party (ARP). The theologian Dr. Abraham Kuyper became his successor. He re-organized the party and mobilized Christians into action. In the 1880's, the ARP continued to grow and soon replaced the Conservatives as the main anti-Liberal opposition. The Dutch Christians were persistent in prayer and refused to surrender to the spirit of the times. They were in it for the long haul and God blessed their efforts.

Some of you may say "I agree with your views, but how effective can we be outside of Parliament? Is there anything we can do as a party now?" I believe we can. We should have brainstorming sessions to discuss the way the image of the CHP can be improved, continue to develop responsible policies and function as a pressure group. Dr. A. Troost, professor emeritus' on Social Ethics in the Faculty of Economic Sciences at Free University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands, notes "that a Christian political party, even though it has no chance of ever gaining political power of government, should, nevertheless, be established as a public witness." He also observes that Christians can act through pressure groups or personal contacts with politicians, on specific issues of practical concern. He concludes that these two possible ways of proceeding can, in certain circumstances, be combined. If we follow his advice, the CHP can then function as a legitimate political party as well as a political lobby group.

Is there a future for Christian political action? Despite the uncertainty of our times, it is certain that the whole duty of man is to fear God and keep His Commandments (Ecclesiastes 12:13). We confess that our God is sovereign and, in this confession lies our comfort, but also strength.

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