

Issues in Reformed Theology

Government

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One commonality between conservative Reformed churches and many Evangelical churches is the desire to influence our nation politically. Many conservative Christians see the problems in our society and view the government's role as important in the shaping of our moral conduct as a nation. Reformed leaders have joined with this movement and have been willing to advocate for political means to bring about societal change. Today's class will look at why Reformed Theology is favorable to taking an activist role in governmental issues.

1. The Reformers' view of the church and government

From the earliest days of the Reformation, churches that supported the Protestant movement were associated with the government of where they lived. This grew out of the Holy Roman Empire that united the Pope with a Holy Roman Emperor who ruled through the support of a variety of territorial feudal lords in Central Europe. As Protestantism spread, churches separated from Rome and established their own relationship with the governmental leaders.

Martin Luther countered the Roman Catholic view of government that saw a unity between the physical and spiritual rulers, where the one kingdom with the state controlling the temporal sword and the Church controlling the spiritual swords. Lutheranism came to adopt the view known as the "Two Kingdoms" with God ruling the world through the state on one hand and ruling the spiritual, heavenly world through the church on the other hand. Earthly rulers ought not to meddle with spiritual matters and ought to be obeyed for the Christian lives under their authority. This view gave rise to the form of government we know, including the beginnings of the separation of church and state.

John Calvin also used the Two Kingdom concept but applied it differently. Calvin's desire to protect the church from the state did not lead him to the converse, that the state should be protected from the church as serving a different purpose. Rather, with Calvin, the Christian's obligation to the state stretched beyond obedience and the temporal realm of the government was not independent from the church. Civil magistrates were obligated to advance Christian doctrine.

This difference between the reformers explains the diversity of perspective of governmental involvement. Those following Luther's thinking adopted a more passive role toward the civil government while Reformed Theology is sourced in Calvin's view of the Christian's role in the public arena. Therefore, Reformed churches have a long history of social and political involvement in comparison to many Protestants.

2. The Reformers' practice of church and government

One example of the different perspectives regarding government practices occurred with the Peasant's War (1524-1525). The poor among the German people saw an opening for relief from economic oppression under the German rulers with the rise of the Reformation against the Catholic Church. Luther was sympathetic with the plight of the poor but did not approve of their violent means for change and sided with the German nobleman in His view that the Bible called for submission to the government. In contrast, Reformed leader Ulrich Zwingli supported the poor in bringing governmental change. In all, over 100,000 people perished in the Peasant's War. So from the very beginning of the Reformation, a difference existed between Reformed thinkers and other Protestants regarding the role of the church to government.

a. John Calvin and Geneva

Geneva was about 10,000 residents at the time John Calvin first came to minister in the Swiss town in 1536. In response to the Reformation, Geneva had followed the Protestants and had been delivered from Catholic control but was still developing a new form of government. Calvin finally settled in Geneva in 1541 with the admonition that "the church could not hold together unless a settled government were agreed on, such, as is prescribed to us in the Word of God and as was in use in the early church." This served to inform the early Reformed view of the practice of government, which that the state ought to support the Christian religion.

The most famous case of the Geneva churches involvement with the governing authorities surrounds Michael Servetus (1511-1553). Servetus was a well-known philosopher who had been opposed by Catholics and Protestants alike. He was arrested by Catholic authorities in April of 1553 but escaped his French imprisonment and arrived in Geneva to listen to a sermon by Calvin in August of 1553. He was immediately arrested as a heretic after the church service was completed.

Servetus was charged with anti-trinitarianism and opposing infant baptism. On October 27, 1553 he was burned at the stake with his personal library serving as the fuel. Calvin advocated for his execution but sought for a more painless death by beheading. This case shows the willingness of the early Reformers to adopt the same practices of Roman Catholicism in order to combat heresy.

Ironically, the Roman Catholic Church executed many Reformers themselves for their beliefs under the charge of heresy. The willingness to use various forms of coercion, including torture and execution, so that "idolatry, sacrilege in the name of God, blasphemies against His truth, and other public offenses against [the One True] religion may not emerge" calls to mind the words of Jesus, "all those who take up the sword shall perish by the sword" (Matthew 26:52). Rather than reconsider the use of government for religious purposes, Calvinists embarked on the very same failed approach of coercion of behavior rather than limiting ministry to the change of the mind and heart through the teaching of the Word, resulting in behavioral change.

b. The Westminster Confession of Faith

The Westminster Confession of Faith is the leading guide for doctrine among Presbyterians and it was written in the context of the governmental directive of the English Parliament to appoint “learned, godly and judicious Divines” to guide the religious issues for the Church of England. The Parliament’s goal was to unite with Scottish Calvinism in order to unite with Scotland against the King of England, Ireland and Scotland, Charles I. So the Confession was produced in order to bring about change in the ruling authority.

The 23rd chapter of the Confession described the role of civil authority. The government could not interfere with the teaching of the Church but it had a role in society to preserve the unity of the church by opposing dissenters. The Confession not only opposed the doctrine of Roman Catholicism, it called the Pope as the anti-Christ. It not only viewed the Catholic Mass as idolatrous, but it gave the civil magistrates the authority to punish heresy.

The 24th chapter addressed marriage and the Confession contributed to the role the government plays in approving marriage and prohibiting divorce and adultery. Our society has been moving away from the civil governance of marriage by the elimination of laws against adultery (or enforcing the laws in states where penalties remain on the books) and redefinition of marriage.

c. The Puritans

The Puritans were Calvinists who came to North America to escape religious oppression. Whether it was the Presbyterian Puritans who supported the idea of a national church or the Congregational Puritans who favored the independence of the local church, all were intent on a righteous society functioning under God’s law. The Bible’s rules and regulations covered life for everyone.

As American society developed and free elections began in Massachusetts, one of the early requirements of voters in Puritan areas was church membership. This was because of the expectation that government was to ensure godliness. There was no religious tolerance as those with dissenting views (Baptists, Anglicans, Quakers, Catholics) were banned. It was the Puritan civil codes that formed the basis for the Salem witch trials of the late seventeenth century.

d. The Temperance Movement

The movement to eliminate the sale of alcohol in the United States was led in large part by Presbyterian ministers. Presbyterian minister Lyman Beecher founded the American Temperance Society in 1826. While the Prohibition Act was the work of many types of religious organizations, Reformed leaders were active from the beginnings of the movement. This example of political involvement demonstrates the appetite that Reformed Christians have had throughout history in the use of laws to change behavior.

3. Christian Reconstructionism

In our last class, we looked at the influence of Christian Reconstructionism in the modern rise of Postmillennialism. Reconstructionism views that we must return to the Judeo-Christian ethics from which our society has departed. The eschatological part of Reconstructionism sees the return of Christ as being the result of this reconstruction of society.

Yet Theonomy, not eschatology, is at the heart of Reconstructionism. Theonomy combines the Greek words “God” and “Law” and teaches that the proper view of government is where Divine Law rules the society. Theonomy is the Reformed approach to the various forms of Christian political ideologies that fall under the broad category of Dominion Theology. Dominion Theology views that the whole world should be subject to the original command of God for man to rule over it (Genesis 1:26). The view is that Christians ought to labor to bring all of society under the dominion of God’s Word.

Theonomy considers that the Bible instructs both personal and social ethics. As such, citizens of a country ought to vote and govern according to the Law of God found in the Bible. Theonomy is a particular manifestation of Dominion Theology that sees this accomplished in conjunction with the Old Testament Law.

This Divine Law includes the civil laws of the Old Testament. The civil laws even extend to the punishments found in those civil laws. Therefore, acts such as adultery and homosexuality would be punishable by death (Leviticus 20:10-14). Blasphemy and idolatrous worship of false religions are dealt the same punishment (Deuteronomy 17:1-17) along with disobedient children (Leviticus 20:9).

At a minimum, Theonomy is consistent with its view of the Old Testament Law. In accordance with Reformed doctrine, it views that Law is from God and therefore is applicable to believers. It does not view that it should be selectively applied or partially applied. Since Reconstructionism is Reformed theologically, the radical nature of Theonomy has divided Reformed pastors. Some believe in Theonomy in the full sense but most other Reformed leaders do not agree.

Some believe in a modified form of Theonomy that views that the Old Testament Law as indeed applying our government but allows for the exclusion of the Old Testament penal laws. This avoids the most difficult aspect of Theonomy but this also undermines the very appeal of it among Reformed thinkers. It fails to consistently apply the entire Old Testament to society but selectively relates Old Testament ethics.

The biggest practical obstacle for Theonomy is that it is all theoretical. No society has adopted Theonomy or any version of it. So most Reformed leaders advance a greatly modified version of the application of the Law. But nevertheless, Theonomy has been influential in Reformed circles even if it is not actually embraced.

4. The mainstream Reformed view of government

The Westminster Confession addressed the use of the Law in society by a vague reference to the “general equity of the Law.” Many understand this to mean there are general fitting applications of the Old Testament Law that adjust for society today. As an illustration of this, R.C. Sproul wrote,

“In Old Testament Israel homeowners were required to have fences on their roofs. Such a law would make little sense in our day since we do not spend much time on our roofs as our fathers did. The “general equity” suggests that the point is safety for families and their guests. Thus one could argue that modern homeowners ought to have fences around their swimming pools. How loosely one applies “general equity” would tend to describe how closely one might identify with Theonomy as an ideology.”

This is an attempt to bridge the gap between the literal Old Testament Law and the sensible use in a pluralistic society. But it begs the question of whether society would ever support any governmental laws with an Old Testament basis.

One aspect of Theonomy that appeals broadly to Reformed leaders is the desire to have the governmental laws based upon the Bible. As Sproul puts it, “we will either have man’s law, or God’s law and only a fool would choose man over God.” But beyond Theonomy, Reformed people have other reasons to engage in an active role in shaping the government:

- 1) The perceived need to engage in social ethics. There is a sense that Christians are just as responsible to have a leading influence in society under the duty to be “salt and light” as they are to teach the church or evangelize the world.
- 2) The “myth of neutrality” views that it is impossible to not take sides in the culture war in society. There is no middle ground in this view since to not actively engage is to support evil.
- 3) The cooperation with many other Christians who advocate for political and social activism. Many wrongly consider the moral condition of our society to be a reflection upon the spiritual condition of the Church.
- 4) The indignation with a societal decay along with a view that government provides a solution to this moral decay.
- 5) The view that the source of law comes from the Bible and not from God’s natural law that is imbedded in the conscience of mankind.
- 6) The influence of the Christian homeschool movement, which is significantly influenced by Theonomy. Theonomist Gary North writes, “the government schools are established as a humanist religion aimed at stamping out Christianity.

Another part of common Reformed thought regarding the government is the area of the separation of church and state. That the Westminster Confession of Faith was ratified by the parliament of England gives evidence that the belief in a separation of church and state is not derived from Reformed Theology. The Westminster Confession opposed the involvement of the civil authorities in the governance of the Church but it certainly allowed for the involvement of the church in the affairs of the civil government.

The concept of a separation between church and state is a historically Baptist one, not a Reformed one. Presbyterian pastor D. James Kennedy wrote, “if we are committed and involved in taking back the nation for Christian moral values, and if we are willing to risk the scorn of the secular media and the bureaucracy that stand against us, there is no doubt we can witness the dismantling of not just the Berlin Wall but the even more diabolical ‘wall of separation’ that has led to increasing secularization, godlessness, immorality, and corruption in our country.” The view that the church ought to play an active role in shaping the government, and that through the government the society is conformed to God’s will, is well entrenched in Reformed thinking.

5. A biblical view of government

There is no question regarding the responsibility to submit to the government (Romans 13:1-7). This much is not at issue. We ought to give honor to whom honor is due (Romans 13:7) and honor is due to the ruling authorities (1 Peter 2:17). What is in question is the role of the church in governmental affairs. There is no expressed prohibition in the Bible for Christians to participate in the political or governmental areas of society. Likewise there is no command for Christians to participate in the political or governmental areas of society. Therefore, there is freedom for believers to function according to their own interests and desires.

However, the New Testament does provide us with ample indications of our mission and ministry to our society, namely through the gospel of Jesus Christ. When Christ came He did not hold public office, nor did He join the Zealots whose goal was to overthrow the Roman rule of the land of Israel. His agenda was completely different.

Christ’s agenda for His disciples was the same as His own. Christ told them “As the Father has sent Me, I also send you” in John 20:21. Furthermore, we are called by the last directive of Christ to go and to make disciples of all nations through baptism and teaching them to observe His commandments. Jesus commissioned His followers to go into the world and to be witnesses of His resurrection. The government is not in view.

Beyond obedience and honor, our responsibility toward the government is described in 1 Timothy 2:1-7. We ought to pray for those in authority. The reason for our prayer for those in authority is not for the moral improvement of our world but rather that we may live a tranquil life. Furthermore, it is for the sake of the gospel that we want to live a tranquil life, for God our Savior desires all men to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth. Peace can provide opportunities to minister while conflict may produce greater opposition to the spread of the Word.

Also, our ability to communicate the truth of Jesus can be hindered when we are perceived to be seeking to advocate for a political perspective. Paul taught that we ought to become all things to all men in order to save some (1 Corinthians 9:19-23). This calls us to avoid unnecessary division for the sake of the gospel. The consequence of political activism is that it may limit our hearing among those of a different political persuasion.

The enthusiasm for forming a Christian government must be tempered by the fact that Christians are a minority (Matthew 7:13-14). The enactment of moral laws requires the support of the population or they will be short-lived. The classic example is the work of the church to bring the eighteenth amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Prohibition failed because it was passed with political muscle over the will of those governed. Any moral agenda must begin with the beliefs of the people.

6. Conclusion

Many churches have a great interest in influencing the society through the government and Reformed Churches share this interest in varying degrees. The more a church has been influenced by the Reformed teachings of Reconstructionism, the more likely they are to seek governmental change according to the Old Testament Law. The lack of more aggressive rejection of Theonomy by Reformed leaders has allowed this thinking to be more influential.

Governmental activism has been a part of the history of Reformed churches from the inception of Calvinism. From the church in Geneva to the Parliamentary ratification of the Westminster Confession to the Puritans arrival in the United States, the view that the government was a necessary means to ensuring a moral people. This leads to great dissatisfaction when government fails to uphold a righteous moral code, leading to political activism.

The key text about “salt and light” to the society is *who we are* as Christians, not what we are *called to be*. According to Matthew 5:13-16, the outworking of our faith cannot be hidden. It is seen by our good works, not by our political muscle.