

Working in Anticipation of Christ's Coming: A Response

By André Schutten

Dr. VanDam very helpfully sets out a strong, biblical case for robust political and social engagement by Christians in today's world. He also explains how we should do it and what we should expect in doing it. His paper is another wonderful example of how the doctrines of the Church have real-world implications today. While there is so much that could be discussed on this topic, my response will focus in on political engagement in particular (leaving social and cultural engagement for another discussion), with a view to the end times.

The spectrum of Christian political engagement

Christian political engagement falls on a spectrum: on one end, there is the so-called two kingdoms approach in which Christians live a dualist life. There is the explicitly Christian stuff (church, family devotions, etc.) and the "kingdom of man" stuff (politics, science, economics, etc.). In an extreme form of two-kingdoms theology, there is Church and there is State and ne'er the twain shall meet. Dr. VanDam tackles the two-kingdoms approach head on. I really appreciate Dr. VanDam's fulsome critique here; it is a question to needs to be dealt with because it has very dangerous implications for our country and our churches.

On the other end of the spectrum of Christian political engagement is an approach called Theonomy which has as its goal the creation of a distinctly Christian government that will uphold the Law of God as set out in the Old Testament (ceremonial laws excepted). At its most extreme, this view includes laws against adultery and blasphemy punishable by death. Dr. VanDam does not address this form of Christian political engagement in his paper.

Somewhere in the middle of this Christian political engagement spectrum lies an approach called principled pluralism. Principled pluralism recognizes that we do not live in an exclusively Christian country, that our nation grows increasingly diverse. Gideon Strauss explains "principled pluralism" as a paradigm that allocates enough freedom of conscience, worship, and practice that all faiths can flourish rather than compete. This also means that Christians have full access to influencing civil government, but that other religious worldviews (Muslim, Buddhist, secular-humanist) also have full and equal access to influence civil government.

The ultimate goal of Christian political engagement

The first question that arises then is this: Where should the Christian find himself on the scale of Christian political engagement? Furthermore, what is the ultimate goal of Christian political engagement? Is it to institute a Christian government, to return us to a seemingly better time when our kings and politicians recognized the sovereignty of God?

Dr. James K.A. Smith writes that

the *scope* of God's redemptive work is bigger and wider than the rescue of individual souls. Christ's redemption is *cosmic* – it effects not only the redemption of our souls but the redemption of every aspect of this entire groaning creation (Rom. 8:22). Through the cross, God reconciles *all things* to himself, “whether things on earth or things in heaven” (Col. 1:20).¹

Should we include politics in this “reconciling of all things”? Do we as Reformed Christians seek to be instruments that effect (not just affect, but actually bring about) the redemption of politics, of civil governments on this side of Christ's return?

Dr. VanDam paraphrases Bavink's theology as ‘grace restores nature’. Bavink writes, “The spiritual life is meant to refashion the natural and moral life in its *full depth and scope* according to the laws of God.”² Again, does this “full depth and scope” include politics, and if so (as Dr. VanDam advocates at page 6) then should we be instituting Christian government, along the lines of Theonomy? If not, then is our political engagement a mere half-measure?

Finally, if we reject the goal of Theonomy, and we are simply competing in a public square, clamoring with various other religious voices to be heard, need we say, “Thus saith the LORD” whenever we engage politically? Is it enough to advance a Biblical model on various political issues by only citing social-scientific, legal or philosophical evidence for our position? Can we be faithful in our political advocacy for Christian schools, for example, by simply arguing for religious freedom (referencing the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*) without referencing the Scriptures which show that God gave parents, not the civil government, primary responsibility for the education of their children? (See, for example, God's directions to Abraham in [Gen. 18](#), God's instructions to the people of Israel to teach their children his commands in [Deut. 6](#), the generational instruction outlined in [Psalm 78](#), or scan through the [book of Proverbs](#), filled with instructions on how to “train up a child in the way he should go” ([Prov. 22](#)).) Must we cite Scripture in our political engagement?

Freedom of religion

With the rise of Islam in Europe and with terrorist attacks happening even here in Canada (sometimes just across the street) does the principle of religious freedom, a foundational aspect of principled pluralism, start to lose its lustre? Does the original version of the Belgic Confession, Article 36 actually have it right? Before 1905, the Confession stated that, the civil government was to remove and prevent “all idolatry and false worship” and to destroy “the kingdom of the antichrist.”

¹ James K.A. Smith, *Letters to a Young Calvinist* (Grand Rapids, MI: BrazosPress, 2010), p. 102.

² Herman Bavink, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4 vols., ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003-8), 4:437 [emphasis added].

If Jesus is Head over all things, then the civil magistrate as vice-regent to King Jesus must also rule over society for the benefit of the Church. He is not called to be neutral anymore than a Christian man is neutral in the home or at church. Seemingly those who push for religious liberty put the magistrate in a category all his own: everyone else but him is expected to keep the commandments in their own sphere, but as soon as the magistrate enters office he lives and operates by a different standard. Just as a man as head of his home is under obligation to rid him home of idols, just as the elders of the church are under obligation to rid the church of idols, should not also the magistrate/the government be under obligation to rid the land of idols? Why did Article 36 of the Belgic Confession get changed in 1905? What are the implications for today? What are the implications for our eschatology?

Finally, at page 3, Dr. VanDam writes, “Those in authority over us are not our adversaries.” Is this the case? Today, it seems politicians and human rights commissions and supreme court judges regularly rule against Christians, restricting our freedoms. Yet the Bible teaches they have been put over us “for our good.” So what do we do in situations where the civil magistrate is not acting for our good?

Further Questions for Discussion:

1. Kuyper’s sphere sovereignty paradigm, while not perfect, is helpful in understanding areas of primary responsibility given to various institutions of society by God (e.g., family, church, State, etc.). However, lessons from the nation of Israel in the Old Testament seem tricky to apply today – Israel as a nation is probably more comparable to the modern Church than to a modern nation-state. If so, how limited is the utility of looking to the nation of Israel as a paradigm for political and social reform/engagement?
2. Dr. VanDam cites the example of John the Baptist warning Herod to stop sleeping with his sister-in-law as an example of political action. Would we see that as being an acceptable area of criticism for State engagement today? Would it be comparable to churches condemning President Clinton for his “indiscretions”? Would such action be seen as a violation of the so-called separation of Church and State?
3. Dr. VanDam writes, “Daniel and his friends did not object to being part of the political order of the day *as long as* they did not have to compromise their faith.” (pg. 4, emphasis added). He also writes, “...when it comes to politics and passing laws we may need to seek change incrementally... We may need to exercise some tolerance *and compromise* for the less than ideal in the short term while keeping the desired goal in focus.” (p. 10, emphasis added). How do we square this apparent contradiction?

4. When we look at history we see examples of Christians who rise to power and cause great harm, for example by requiring allegiance to Roman Catholicism or Protestantism on pain of death. As a result, the reputation of Christ Himself is also maligned. One could argue that the response is to govern Christianly, but the sinful nature of man and the temptation that arises from having so much power makes this very rare. Would it not be better for Christ's Name and glory for the government to remain focussed on the "kingdom of man" and leave the promotion of God's law to the Church?
5. In Revelations 22 it says "Let the one who does wrong continue to do wrong; let the vile person continue to be vile;" Does this not suggest that in this age when we wait for the return of Christ we should not be focussed on seeking the welfare of the city to which we belong?
6. Should things get better or worse for Christians before Christ returns? Does it matter? Is there a tendency in some Christian political engagement to seek salvation in government, or, to put it more mildly, to seek most meaningful cultural reformation through law?
7. Dr. VanDam makes a good case that political activism is in keeping with God's Word. But that doesn't mean it deserves the attention it is getting. Have we gone too far in Canada's Reformed churches and should we be putting our time more into spreading the good news through evangelism?
8. Dr. VanDam gives Old Testament proof for the Israelites to seek the welfare (*shalom*) of the city to which they have been exiled (page 3). Is there a similar call to seek the welfare of the city in the New Testament (beyond just praying and submitting)? Does the silence in the New Testament suggest an important lesson?
9. God demands that He is Lord of all of life (page 8), but is it the role of the civil government to apply this with issues like abortion? Should it not be the responsibility of individuals to govern themselves? After all, governments will never be able to stop things like abortion, especially as technology evolves. Should the focus be instead on educating the public to make good choices, or preaching the Gospel so people repent and live accordingly?
10. Dr. VanDam discusses the Kingdom of Heaven being like yeast, and applies the hidden yeast as a call to, *inter alia*, political action (page 9). Does yeast have to be political? Can we seek the welfare of the city simply by loving our neighbours? As John MacArthur argues, is not politics a distraction from what we should be doing?
11. Is there a connection between freedom of religion/freedom of conscience and the *imago dei*? Does the doctrine of *imago dei* require civil government to protect religious freedom?