

“Lasting recovery is only possible when there is a blessing on the preaching of the Word. It can expose any worldly wisdom.”

If you came to one of ARPA Canada’s fall tour presentations last year, you may remember hearing this quote that I attributed to Groen Van Prinsterer. Although he lived way back in 1801-1876 and was active in a different (Dutch) political context, his writings speak powerfully to our 21st century Western world.



Groen’s clear-headed call for faithful Christian political engagement is more than relevant. It is much-needed correction for so many Christians who make Christ Lord of their private life but largely keep Him on the shelf when it comes to their public engagement.

It is much-needed correction for so many Christians who make Christ Lord of their private life but largely keep Him on the shelf when it comes to their public engagement.

At our weekly staff meetings, the ARPA team recently worked through the book “**Building a Nation on Rock or Sand: Groen Van Prinsterer for Today.**” Written by H. Smitskamp and translated by Harmen Boersma, the short book is full of zinger quotes that challenge us to live a consistent and faithful life in the public square.

Groen Van Prinsterer was a historian and politician in the Netherlands. He founded and led the Anti-Revolutionary Party (ARP). The ARP was later led by Abraham Kuyper, who later became the Prime Minister of the Netherlands from 1901-1904.

Groen applies faith to politics with a clarity and conviction that we rarely see in the Western world today. The clarity comes from understanding that humanity has

always faced, and always will face, two options: either we submit to our sovereign God, or we effectively try to make *ourselves* sovereign. This antithesis is the dividing line between all people through all ages. If God is sovereign, he is necessarily Lord over our public life as well. Christians who partake in political life can't just pay lip service to this. Living it out means wholehearted devotion to God's revealed truth, even amidst a secular and pluralist society.

For Groen, Christ's Lordship means that "*the flourishing of the nations cannot be found in their policy unless the will of the revealed God is accepted as its foundation.*" Canada, the United States, and so many other countries in the West are built on principles that flow from the revealed will of God. This has resulted in the formation of foundational concepts in our law and governance, such as the rule of law and human rights. It is little surprise to see that, as we publicly distance ourselves from God, these concepts continually erode.

His comparison of Revolution (replacing God's law with human wisdom) to Reformation is particularly insightful:

"Revolution grew out of the sovereignty of humans, Reformation the sovereignty of God. The first judges revelation by means of reason, while the other subjects reason to revelation. The former uproots individual views, the latter unifies them in faith. Revolution frazzles social and family ties, Reformation bundles and blesses them. The first maintains ground by murdering and killing, while the other overcomes with martyrs. The former arises out of the abyss, while the latter descends out of heaven."

Revolution is on full display in Canadian law and politics today. Autonomy has become the guiding principle in justifying the overturning of laws on abortion, euthanasia, and sexuality. Our society is eager to benefit from the fruits of our Christian heritage while at the same time revolting against any suggestion of a transcendent authority.

"Revolution grew out of the sovereignty of humans, Reformation the sovereignty of God. . . Revolution frazzles social and family ties

The sad reality is that we as a nation have done this willingly. And this doesn't bode well for our future: *"The worst is ... when a nation, which in world history has been known to live under God's blessings, according to the testimony of the Gospel, through its own denervation becomes bastardized— when a nation commits national suicide of its soul and forfeits its right to live already before its death sentence."*

Johnny Lee,
Reformation
bundles and blesses
them."

This reminded me of [an op-ed](#) I previously wrote for the Vancouver Sun after Canada legalized euthanasia. In that piece was a paragraph about the national suicide occurring in Canada: "What happens to a society that discourages new life, kills vulnerable life, surgically alters healthy bodies to conform to unhealthy minds, puts the greatest taxes on those who are the most economically productive, and treats a basic building block of life (carbon) as if it were a pollutant? That society is committing suicide."

Yes, the Netherlands of Groen's day was "Christian," whereas few would refer to Canada as such today. But if we dig beneath the surface we find that, although the country may have been officially Christian, it was far from that in substance. Explaining this decline Groen said, *"It is because the gospel truth has been banned from state and church, school and home. More correctly it is being faked. People accepted relative gospel truths, which were being conformed to the demand of the circumstances and state formations."*

Smitskamp rightly concludes that "revolution has never been able to provide what it promised. Especially the promise of freedom in the civil sphere was never accomplished." Like our first parents in the Garden of Eden, our confused world still thinks that freedom comes from throwing off the "chains" of law, especially precepts from God's Word. Yet the more we do so, the more ensnared and anxious we are in a world without boundaries. Just as a fence around a pool gives a child freedom to play outside, so the fences of God's law give us freedom to live as we were meant to live as humanity in this broken world.



Our confused world still thinks that freedom comes from throwing off the “chains” of [God’s] law. Yet the more we do so, the more ensnared and anxious we are in a world without boundaries.

Through his entire life, Groen fought an uphill battle, not all that different than what we face today. Yet he moved forward with confidence and zeal, consistent in both private and public life.

From the frontlines of the political battles of the 1800s, he leaves us with some meaty thoughts that we should chew on and take to heart still today:

“When persuasion seems impossible, witnessing remains a duty.”

“One will not be judged for the impossibility of resistance but rather for the willingness to cooperate.”

“Let us be aware that if no great things can be done now, the negligence of the small things could display the greatest unfaithfulness.”

Amen, brother. May the anti-revolutionary principles of old mobilize generations of faithful political action on this side of the Atlantic today.

—

For those who are interested in learning more from Groen van Prinsterer, consider starting with these two articles by James K.A. Smith:

[Join the Anti-Revolutionary Party](#)

[Revolutionism and Our Secular Age](#)