

GOD'S USE OF THE POLITICAL PARTY 'LORDS OF THE CONGREGATION' IN THE REFORMATION OF 16TH CENTURY SCOTLAND

It is the prayer of Reformation Party members that God would use the Party as one means towards Biblical reformation of the nation today, even as God used the political party 'Lords of the Congregation' in 16th century Scotland. It therefore behooves us to consider this 16th century political party.

Its Rise and Development

In the years preceding 1557 there were more and more people in Scotland, including among the political leadership, who by God's grace were personally adopting the reformed Christian faith. From among these believers in 1557 a group of Protestant Scottish political leaders coalesced around the cause to bring Scotland officially to the Biblical Protestant Christian faith. They requested for Protestant minister John Knox to return to Scotland from his exile in Geneva. Rev. Knox and his fellow Protestant ministers would promote the cause in the Church, while they promoted the cause politically, both working together for Biblical reformation. Rev. John Knox answered the call, and expressed his determination to come to Scotland.

This joint effort of ecclesiastical and political leaders proved important to the cause. Political leaders in Scotland favorable to Biblical Protestantism had encouraged Rev. Knox to return to Scotland, but by October 1557 it was clear these civil leaders needed encouragement from Rev. Knox. Fearful of failure, the political leaders expressed concern of moving forward, and even recommended Rev. Knox cease from his plans to return to Scotland. Just at the right time, Rev. Knox wrote letters to them, encouraging them to continue their forward march of reformation. This encouragement lifted their spirits, and God in His grace gave them determination to form a political party, bound together by covenant before God.

The political party known as the 'Lords of the Congregation' was thus born in this crucible when it was uncertain which direction Scotland would go and when it was quite risky to take the side of Biblical reformation. The whole apparatus of Church and State up to that time had been decidedly Roman Catholic, and Protestantism was strenuously suppressed. In December of 1557 members of the party signed the following covenant:

"We, perceiving how Satan, in his members, the anti-christs of our time, cruelly do rage, seeking to overthrow and destroy the gospel of Christ and His congregation, ought, according to our bounden duty, to strive in our Master's cause, even unto the death, being certain of the victory in Him. The which our duty being well considered, we do promise before the Majesty of God and His congregation, that we, by His grace, shall, with all diligence, continually apply our whole power, substance, and our very lives, to maintain, set forward, and establish the most blessed Word of God and His congregation: and shall labour, at our possibility, to have faithful ministers, truly and purely to administer Christ's gospel and sacraments to His people. We shall maintain them, nourish them and defend them, the whole congregation of Christ, and every member thereof, at our whole powers and waging of our lives, against Satan and all wicked power that doth intend tyranny or trouble against the foresaid congregation. Unto the which holy word and congregation we do join us, and so do forsake and renounce the congregation of Satan, with all the superstitious abomination and idolatry thereof; and, moreover, shall declare ourselves manifestly enemies thereto, by this our faithful promise before God, testified to His congregation by our subscription to these presents."

In 1558 the Lords of the Congregation petitioned the regent of Scotland at the time, Mary of Guise, to restrain the continuing persecution of Protestants by the civil authorities, at the instigation of the Roman Catholic Church, and to promote the true Biblical religion. In 1559 Rev. John Knox returned to Scotland and assisted the Lords of the Congregation in their cause, preaching the true reformed religion and encouraging the Lords of the Congregation to persevere in their course. Nevertheless, the persecution of Protestants persisted, urged on by the Roman Catholic Church. In course of time the Lords of the Congregation were able to garner such support as to summon the Scottish parliament, now dominated by those of the political party the Lords of the Congregation. The summoned parliament in turn deposed the regent. The Scottish parliament then formed an alliance with Protestant England for protection against Roman Catholic French troops in Scotland who supported the deposed regent. But in the end, the French troops agreed to withdraw from Scotland in 1560, with the signing of the Treaty of Edinburgh.

God's Blessing upon its Efforts

With the French troops withdrawn, the goals of the Lords of the Congregation were established by the Scottish parliament. These included adoption of a reformed confession of faith for Scotland, abjuring the authority of the Pope, and forbidding the administration or attendance at a Roman Catholic Mass. Scotland as a nation was now officially set upon a Biblical Protestant course. This in no wise meant all of their problems were ended. Indeed, owing to continued conspiracies by the Roman Catholic Church and its supporters, combined with sinfulness of Protestants, Protestant Scotland would yet go through many trials and tribulations. But despite such trials and tribulations, it surely must be agreed that the Lord had blessed the cause of this Protestant political party. Some of the fruits of the Biblical reformation in Scotland and beyond include the Scots Confession of 1560, the King's Confession and the National Covenant of 1581, the National Covenant of Scotland of 1638, the Solemn League and Covenant of 1643, and the composition and adoption of the Westminster Standards during the 1640s. God used these instruments, and the preaching of the Biblical truths by ministers of His church, to convert many sinners. They were not left in their native fallen darkness, but graced by the truths of God's word, accompanied by the work of the Spirit in regenerating undeserving sinners and leading them in the Biblical path.

Its Lessons for Today

Our forefathers in the faith provide an example for us to follow today. We are in circumstances where the civil government of our nation is set against true Biblical religion and much of the Christian church is compromising and corrupted, not so unlike the situation in Scotland before its reformation. What can we learn from Scotland's reformation and the Lords of the Congregation?

1. We need to have faith in God and not be man-centered in our approach to politics or any other aspect of life.
2. We must be willing to sacrifice on behalf of the cause of Christ, in gratitude for Christ's far greater sacrifice on behalf of His people. "The disciple is not above his master." The members of the Lords of the Congregation demonstrated they were willing to do this in their day, but what about us now?
3. The encouragement and support of the reformed church and its ministers is very important to a reformed political party. Humanly speaking, the Lords of the Congregation would not have gotten far off the ground without the encouragement and support of Rev. John Knox. At the same time, the reformed church can be greatly assisted when civil leaders "kiss the Son" and protect and support the church.
4. We need to abjure political parties which involve us in political alliances with heretics and infidels, realizing such alliances thoroughly undermine the political leader's first duty, which is to "kiss the Son" in his governance. As the Scots Confession of 1560 reminds us: "to kings, princes, rulers, and magistrates, we affirm that chiefly and most principally the conservation and purgation of the religion appertains; so that not only they are appointed for civil policy, but also for maintenance of the true religion, and for suppressing of idolatry and superstition whatsoever."
5. We should be energetic and proactive, not indifferent and phlegmatic, for the cause of Christ, politically and every other wise. God would have us use means and labor for His cause, while at the same time recognizing everything is in the hands of the sovereign God. Rev. John Knox and the Lords of the Congregation were certainly good examples of this approach.

This tract is published and distributed by the Reformation Party (www.reformationparty.org) to encourage explicitly reformed Christian politics so that civil governments "kiss the Son" by upholding God's moral law summarized in the Ten Commandments. Such Reformation Party Tracts are available for free print out and distribution from www.reformationparty.org/rp/tracts.php.