

# "God & Country" or Christ's Kingdom?

## The Dangers of Contemporary Christian Americanism

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**I**n recent years, a very vocal element within mainstream Christianity has been promoting a "nationalized gospel" — a gospel wrapped in an American flag. Unbiblical notions about patriotism and America's "special" place in God's plan abound in books, magazines, radio and TV programs produced by these religio-political zealots, as well as from their pulpits.

To equate nationalism, American or any other, with faithfulness to the gospel is a misguided perspective that can only serve to weaken our witness to the saving grace of God through Jesus Christ. When such nationalistic battle cries dominate our agenda, the true message of the gospel will be inevitably compromised, if not forgotten altogether. It is time for us to "test the spirits" urging us to "turn America back to God and traditional 'Judeo-Christian' values."

This is not what Jude meant when he urged us to "contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints" (vs. 3). We must not permit our minds to be "led astray from our sincere and pure devotion to Christ" (2 Cor. 11:3) by this biblically unwarranted call to promote a "God and Country" civil religion.

Christ did not call us to reform our *country* but to spread the only message that has the power to change *lives*. If we truly believe in the power of the gospel, we must not let it be weighed down by such unbiblical baggage.

## **It Goes Like This . . .**

The proposition that America *as a nation* occupies a special place in God's earthly purpose (with the implication that America is better than other nations) is generally based on arguments much like those expounded in the following excerpt:

The United States is a blessed nation, founded on Godly principles by devout God fearing men and women. From the personal writings of the authors of our constitution, we learn that they looked to God for the wisdom to guide our country's affairs. God has a blueprint for keeping our country great and it's found in 2 Chron. 7:14 . . . As we approach the coming elections, we have a responsibility before God to pray for the candidates and to vote. As a citizen of the United States, it is up to us to make choices based upon what He has already said in the Bible concerning the issues that face our nation. No candidate is perfect, but Jesus said that you would know a tree by its fruit. Do our choices for leaders have track records that could be considered God fearing fruit? Do they support and uphold traditional Christian values? Do their lifestyles exude strong moral character? Do their choices point us to the ideals that made our country great? Let's stand up for what's right even if it's not politically correct. God's not through with our nation yet. We can still accomplish mighty things and see our country's problems turn around because "Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord (Psalm 3:12).

This is typical of the kind of reasoning that is common to most of the advocates of such agendas. The problem is that it is based on alleged facts that simply are not true. It is repeatedly maintained, for example, that God's blessing upon America as a nation has its roots in the "godly" perspectives and objectives of its founding fathers. To make such an assertion demonstrates either a complete ignorance of America's early history or, worse yet, an act of deliberate revisionism.

The truth is that a majority of our country's founders were non-evangelicals and many were Masons. They may have indeed used numerous references to "God" in their writings, but most of them knew nothing of the grace of God in Jesus Christ. Thomas Jefferson, for example, the man who contributed more to the framing of our constitution than anyone else, was a deist and hardly a model of moral rectitude. Accounts of his philandering and marital infidelity are well documented. And the so-called "Jefferson Bible," assumed by some to provide evidence of his commitment to Christian principles, was actually a bible lie had cut up with a pair of scissors to remove all references to such things as the shedding of blood for the remission of sins. He wanted nothing to do with the cross, and by the time he had finished with his "bible," all that remained was a collection of platitudes he could use to add an apparent "godly" air to his political postulations. Benjamin Franklin, another major contributor to our founding literature, was a Rosicrucian who had no interest whatsoever in the truth as it has been revealed in and through Jesus Christ.

## **Is Any Nation "Better Than Another?"**

The notion that America has been blessed more than other nations because of her alleged "godly" beginning is not only without foundation, but it has spawned other errant teaching as well. Building on that false premise, we are told that the divine "blessing" America has enjoyed will be replaced by "judgment" if Christians do not do their part to bring about a *national* moral reform. God measures nations by their adherence to the Ten Commandments, we are told, and blesses or curses accordingly.

One well-known preacher has gone so far as to declare that God will even bless the unsaved if they faithfully tithe. That may be an effective fund-raising tactic, but as a supposed biblical teaching, it is seriously flawed. The Scriptures teach that blessing comes upon people by grace alone through faith in Jesus Christ, not by works, so that no one can boast (Ephesians 2:9). Contrary to the idea that God blesses any sinner who

renders partial obedience to the law, the Bible clearly teaches that "cursed is everyone who does not continue to do *everything* written in the Book of the Law" (Galatians 3:10). And that is a requirement that no fallen descendent of Adam can meet apart from Christ.

To apply Psalm 33:12 to the United States, therefore, is totally inappropriate. It is typical of biblical interpretation that fails to take New Testament revelation into consideration before making such an application. Prior to the gospel age, the nation of Israel alone was the undeserving, yet divinely chosen recipient of God's special favor and blessing. All others were foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world (Ephesians 2:12). God had surely promised Abraham that through your offspring *all nations* on earth will be blessed . . . (Genesis 26:4), but until Christ appeared the means to that blessing had not been fully revealed. Not until the dividing wall of hostility (Ephesians 2:4) between Israel and all other nations was removed at Calvary was God's promise to Abraham fulfilled. And even then, the promised blessing to all nations was not realized in a geopolitical sense, but rather in the outreach of the gospel to God's elect from every tribe and language and people and nation (Revelation 5:9).

There is indeed a "blessed" nation whose God is the Lord, but it is no longer an entity defined by geographical boundaries. It is the aggregate of believers who have been called out by the gospel from all nations who are now identified as a chosen race, a royal priesthood, *a holy nation*, a people for God's own possession (1 Peter 2:9). These words, cited by Peter from Exodus 19, were originally addressed to Israel as a geographical nation, but in the gospel they now find their ultimate fulfillment in the spiritual house (1 Peter 2:5) made up of believers from all over the world. Since the death and resurrection of Christ, the only "nation" on earth whose God is the Lord is Christ's body, the church. And the only "people" entitled to God's blessings are those who by grace have been accepted in the Beloved (Ephesians 1:6). *All* others remain under God's wrath and curse.

In the New Testament, therefore, the only holy nation is the people belonging to God — redeemed sinners whom God has called out of darkness into his wonderful light (1 Peter 2:9). Spiritually, no country on earth — including, if not especially the United States — is a “godly nation.” Nor can any geopolitical entity claim divine preference over any other. With the end of the Old Testament era came the end of all such national dealings in God's redemptive purposes.

Once, Israel enjoyed God's special favor over all other nations, not because she was more righteous, but because she had been chosen to serve as a type of what was to come, and to provide a lineage that would produce the Messiah. When Christ appeared, however, the type was replaced by the reality. The prophetic significance of Israel came to full realization in a new community wherein there would be neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:28). That new community is the holy nation cited above, and its citizenship is not based on political alignment, but on a saving union with Jesus Christ.

### **Looking for Live Fruit from Dead Trees . . .**

To use Jesus' “good tree/good fruit vs. bad tree/bad fruit” principle as a standard for choosing politicians is also a serious misuse of Scripture. Jesus gave us those criteria to provide a way to identify true believers, not to select an acceptable slate of political candidates. If we were to actually apply Jesus' analogy as a standard for selecting our leaders, we would have to conclude that any politician — Republican, Democrat, Whig or Tory — that is not a believer is a “bad tree,” incapable of producing “good fruit.” This would effectively rule out most candidates for political office. It would often make it impossible to vote for either candidate, regardless of his or her political alignment or legislative accomplishments.

Even more to the point, the very premise that believers have some kind of spiritual duty to actively participate in human campaign and voting processes begs closer scrutiny. Are we, as disciples of Jesus Christ,

somehow obligated to join forces with those who are trying to oust the bad guys and replace them with leaders who supposedly share our “values”? The popular notion that political activism is God’s appointed means for bringing “moral” reform to our country certainly has its zealous advocates, but their zeal is not based on knowledge (Romans 10:2). For the most part, such teaching is gleaned from Old Testament passages that have not been properly filtered through a New Testament lens. When the OT is not re-interpreted under the greater light of New Testament revelation, it can be a veritable mine of “proof texts” providing apparent justification for all kinds of sociological, political, or even military actions aimed at combating evil. Why stop at merely deposing “ungodly” leaders? Using the Old Testament as our national “moral” guide, let’s advocate stoning to death our unruly children, adulterers, Sabbath breakers, worshippers of false Gods, those who seek the counsel of demonic spirits, and even those who blaspheme by taking the Lord’s name in vain. These are also “moral” laws included in the OT canon and their execution would certainly have an impact on our society.

The end of the preceding paragraph may sound facetious, but it is not such a large step from involvement in political activism to participation in these more extreme measures. It is a line that is crossed by those who fire-bomb abortion clinics, or who attack other societal evils with similar tactics, often in God’s name. One of the most important provisions of the “New Covenant” established by the death and resurrection of Christ, however, was to abrogate all such physical methodologies in favor of more effective spiritual means. For that reason, the NT nowhere encourages Jesus’ followers to use human political or legislative processes — and certainly not militaristic intervention — to try to stem the tide of our national moral decay. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world, on the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds (2 Corinthians 10:4).

Does this mean that believers should not participate in any secular voting processes? No, that is not the point. The error is not in voting, but in

the kind of coercion that is often employed to make believers think that if they don't vote they are abdicating their spiritual responsibilities. Nowhere in the NT is there even a hint of a command for us to participate in human election processes. Nor is it a forbidden activity. A believer is free to use his or her own judgment in such matters. If one's conscience leads to abstaining from secular elections, it is no sin. On the other hand, it could very well be a sin to vote if it is done merely as a response to inappropriate pressure from others rather than in faith, for everything that does not come from faith is sin (Romans 14:23b).

### **The Goal of the Gospel: External Reform or Internal Regeneration?**

As we have already observed, there is now only one "holy nation," the universal church of Jesus Christ. All other geopolitical nations are a part of this present world order, and as such are under the control of the evil one (1 John 5:19). They are all included in David's prophetic assessment; Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his Anointed One (Acts 4:25-26). From a biblical perspective, the nations of the earth are the enemies of Christ's kingdom and under the irrevocable curse of eventual destruction. No physical nation is excluded from that description, including the United States. All human efforts notwithstanding, fallen men cannot achieve peace within or between nations nor raise themselves to a righteous standing before God, for God himself has rendered failure certain. As Israel learned, you cannot reject God as your King and expect him to bless your "declaration of independence" (cf. I Samuel 8:7 ff.).

The success of the gospel has never been connected to the external moral virtues of any nation. On the contrary, the gospel has always been the most victorious in the face of severe persecution, and believers have been the strongest when faced, not with governmental approbation, but rather with oppression. We should never mislead people into thinking that the

success and power of the gospel depends on the moral rectitude of our nation. The power of the gospel lies in our faithfulness to its true message, and in our boldness — in the face of any external circumstances — to proclaim that message to anyone who will listen.

Until Jesus returns to establish a new heaven and a new earth (2 Peter 3:13), man's efforts will produce nothing but wars and rumors of wars. . . and we can expect that nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom (Matthew 24:6-7). As Christ's ambassadors, we have not been commissioned to force moral bandages on a fatally wounded society, but simply to urge sinners to be reconciled to God (2 Corinthians 5:20). The only way that we as believers can have any effect on the moral direction of our country is to pray that God will bless our witness by saving those with whom we share the gospel. Changing an unbeliever's politics does not improve his or her standing before God, nor is it a means to his special favor or blessing. It is the sinner's heart that needs regeneration, not his or her political convictions. Paul would not have had to look very hard to find a reason to stir up an outcry against the moral stench in Corinth, nor to encourage ousting its wicked politicians in favor of leaders with better "values," but he deliberately did neither. Instead, he went to that wicked city resolved to know nothing [while he was there] except Jesus Christ and him crucified (1 Corinthians 2:2). Whatever external change may have taken place in Corinth as the result of Paul's evangelistic efforts did not come because its government enacted new laws, but because those who responded to the gospel began to lead new lives.

### **Political Confrontation or Peaceful Coexistence?**

There is also no New Testament warrant for the kinds of political activism and disruptive protests in which believers are often encouraged to participate. As followers of Christ, we better have a pretty solid biblical reason for refusing to comply with our government's ordinances and laws, for we are specifically commanded to submit [ourselves] for the Lord's sake



to every authority instituted among men . . . (1 Peter 2:13). We have no business taking part in acts of “civil disobedience,” or in refusing to pay taxes — no matter how poorly our government may use its revenues. All such actions often do is to bring unnecessary reproach to the precious Name of Jesus Christ.

Rather than to rail against the alleged abuses of our leaders, we are commanded to humbly pray for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives. . . (1 Timothy 2:2). Unless compliance with our government's laws would result in an action specifically identified in the New Testament as sin, we should be the very model of obedience. The only recorded instance of civil disobedience in the book of Acts was when the disciples were commanded to stop telling others about Jesus Christ (cf. Acts 4:16-20).

## **Who Really Places Presidents and Kings in Power?**

Those who have been influenced by the advocates of this “nationalized” gospel are often led to believe they will fail their God if they do not participate in campaign and voting processes and an “ungodly” candidate should happen to win. The implication, if not the actual teaching, is that it is always God's plan to have leaders with the right kind of “values” in power, and when his people fail to get them elected, his perfect will for that nation cannot be accomplished. Dear believer, the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will (Ephesians 1:11) is not so easily thwarted, and that includes the role world leaders play in the unfolding of his eternal purposes in Christ.

It may have been hard to convince the oppressed Jews that it was God who placed Pharaoh on his throne. And yet, God proclaimed, I have raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth (Romans 9:17). Nebuchadnezzar boasted; Is not this the great Babylon I have built as the

royal residence, by my might and power and for the glory of my majesty? (Daniel 4:20), but the proud king was forced to eat grass like an animal to teach him that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes (Daniel 4:25). The lesson Nebuchadnezzar had to learn the hard way is one you and I should humbly accept:

**The Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men  
and gives them to anyone he wishes  
and sets over them the lowliest of men  
(Daniel 4:17).**

While elections and other political mechanisms are the secondary causes involved in placing leaders in power, it is ultimately God himself who sets up kings and deposes them (Daniel 2:21).

Whether a champion of good, or the very embodiment of evil (e.g., Hitler, Idi Amin), no nation — including the United States — has ever had a president, dictator, king or emperor who was not placed in power by God's sovereign hand. And no such leader, good or evil, has ever been removed from power except as it has served God's eternal purpose in Christ. This is why the NT not only fails to endorse human efforts to overturn wicked governments, but commands instead that

Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God (Romans 13:1).

This command is all the more interesting when we take into consideration that a wicked and insane Nero was in power when Paul penned those words.

## **"Traditional Values" Minus Jesus**

Evangelicals are perpetuating tremendous confusion and error by calling an unbelieving culture to embrace "traditional values" and a "Judeo-

Christian heritage” that is not connected to the redemptive work of Christ. In Scripture, ethical demands are always rooted in God's mighty redemptive acts. To speak as if general ethical values should guide culture-at-large without any reference to what God accomplished in Christ is totally inappropriate.

The ethical demands upon Israel under the old covenant and upon the body of Christ under the new covenant spring out of specific redemptive events that separated each covenant people. Israel was set apart from the other nations by God's mighty act: I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage (Exodus 20:2). The Ten Commandments, as well as all of the other Mosaic laws, are inseparably connected with God's outstretched arm on Israel's behalf. The redemptive act involving the exodus from oppression in Egypt was the justification for the moral and ethical stipulations imposed upon Israel. But it also foreshadowed a better exodus to come. Whereas those who were baptized into Moses (1 Corinthians 10:2), were brought out of slavery in Egypt by way of the Red Sea, those who have been baptized by one Spirit into one body . . . (1 Corinthians 12:13) have all passed from death to life (1 John 3:14) by way of the cross of Calvary. Thus, the body of Christ has been set apart from the world by the new exodus accomplished at Golgotha and has become the church [ekklesia] of God, which he purchased with his own blood (Acts 20:28). With this new exodus comes a new ethical and moral code:

A new command I give to you,  
that you love one another,  
as I have loved you,  
that you also love one another  
(John 13:34,15:12-13).

These are two separate redemptive acts and the attending stipulations are exclusive to each.

In light of the inseparable connection between each redemptive act and its requisite ethics, it is a serious mistake to isolate the Ten Commandments as a general "moral code" that can be arbitrarily lifted out of its historical context. The Ten Commandments were given only to Israel as a special people who alone were delivered out of bondage in Egypt. It was neither imposed upon, nor was compliance expected from any other nation surrounding Israel. The connection of this moral code to Israel and the Egyptian exodus is vital, not peripheral. To view the Ten Words as a general code for America to be ostentatiously hung on the walls of our homes or public buildings as if its relationship to Israel's exodus is irrelevant, is to pervert God's Word.

To display the Ten Commandments on the wall of a public building or courthouse suggests that they have jurisdiction over the affairs conducted in that building. It also implies a commitment to comply with and prosecute its laws. In a syncretistic society composed of those who worship Allah, Buddha, Mammon and a thousand material idols, are we really prepared to enforce the command: You shall have no other gods before me? Are we willing to prosecute and imprison those who misuse the name of the Lord your God? Surely we do not expect America to Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. If so, which day are we going to set apart — Saturday or Sunday? And even if we can settle that thorny issue, are we then prepared to enforce the Sabbath requirement that everyone must stay in their homes all day and not go Out (cf. Exodus 16:29)?

The Ten Commandments were part of an exclusive covenant with Old Testament Israel. Neither the promised blessing for keeping them nor the sure curses for breaking them were offered to or imposed upon the rest of the nations, then or now. Breaking those laws does not expose any unbeliever to more judgment, for he or she is condemned already (John 3:18). Nor will observing them obligate God to bless any nation or individual, for no one is justified before God by the law (Galatians 3:11). But the Ten Commandments also have no legal jurisdiction over Christ's people,

For when there is a change of the priesthood, there must also be a change of the law (Hebrews 7:12). Christ, our High Priest, cancelled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross (Colossians 2:14). As a moral code, the law given through Moses at Sinai ended at Calvary. In its place, Christ our new Lawgiver commanded us to love one another (John 13:34), for love is the fulfillment of the law (Romans 13:10). And the "rest" which the Old Testament Sabbath foreshadowed but could not provide is now fulfilled in the rest Christ provides when his people cease from their own works and trust in him for righteousness and salvation (cf. Matthew 11:28-30; Hebrews 4:3-10).

To exhort America to "return to the traditional values of our Judeo-Christian heritage," therefore, is to act as if Golgotha had never occurred. The very fact that the Ten Commandments have become the common ground in this so-called "Judeo-Christian heritage" betrays a tragic paradox. As believers, we need to face the sad fact that there simply is no room for the gospel in such an alleged common heritage. To the degree that "Judeo" is emphasized, "Christian" must be suppressed. Likewise, to the degree that "Christian" is stressed, the "Judeo" part of the coalition will be offended. The only way that "Judeo" and "Christian" elements can unite, therefore, is by adopting a common moral code — minus Jesus. How can any true believer think that God is pleased by efforts to mold the United States into a society espousing a "Judeo-Christian heritage" when, to accomplish that misguided objective, his Son must be left out in order to hold its conflicting components together? We would encourage any professing believer who has been caught up in this fever to seriously consider Jesus' words:

Whoever acknowledges me before men,  
I will also acknowledge him before my Father -in heaven.  
But whoever disowns me before men,  
I will disown him before my Father in heaven  
(Matthew 10:32-33).

Since the Old Covenant with its laws and regulations were abrogated on the cross, would it not be more appropriate to use the language of the New Covenant for our national moral code? Society may tolerate the Ten Commandments on display, but can you imagine the public outcry if a plaque reading, God now commands all people every where to repent (Acts 17:30) or, Take up your cross and follow me (Luke 9:23) or, Lose your life for my sake (Matt. 10:38) or, Love one another, even as I have loved YOU (John 13:34) were hung on the walls of our public buildings? Doesn't that tell you something?

The choice is clear. We can either labor for the gospel of Christ's kingdom that flows out of the new covenant, or we can labor for a nationalized pseudo -religious conformity to an old covenant rooted "Judeo-Christian heritage." To espouse the latter requires us to compromise the exclusive nature of Christ's claims, while faithful witness to the former must include Jesus' radical claims on all who would come to him — claims we must clearly communicate, without compromise or apology. As Douglas Webster perceptively observes,

the Christian ethic is exclusively dependent upon Christian redemption... Jesus' cross is planted squarely at the center of the believer's existence, providing both the means of salvation and the challenge of a new life style.

## **"God & Country" or Christ's Kingdom?**

I love Thy kingdom Lord,  
The house of thine abode,  
The church our blest  
Redeemer saved  
With His own' precious blood.  
I love Thy church, O God:  
Her walls before thee stand  
Dear as the apple of thine eye,

And graven on thy hand.  
For her my tears shall fall,  
For her my prayers ascend;  
To her my cares and  
toils be giv'n,  
Till toils and cares shall end.

The moving heart-cry so beautifully expressed in this hymn by Timothy Dwight [c. 1800] has little place in the current rhetoric about "turning our country back to God." Rather than being encouraged to build up the walls of Zion, Christians are being incited to spend their precious time and energy improving our nation. It is a misdirection of resources that has no New Testament justification. Just what does the NT teach us about how and where our energies should be spent?

In the first place, the NT addresses believers, not in terms of their national identity, but as those who have been baptized by one Spirit into one body (1 Corinthians 12:13) where there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female (Galatians 3:28). They have become the earthly body of their exalted and risen head, Jesus Christ. On their behalf, God has placed all things under [Jesus] feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body . . . [Ephesians 1:22-23]. Christ's present reign over everything in the universe does not have as its primary concern the welfare of earthly nations, but of the kingdom given to him by his Father. Nor do his people have as their primary concern the affairs of this world, but rather the interests of the kingdom of their Lord and Savior. Their business when they gather, therefore, is not to promote human national agendas, but the objectives of the kingdom of God [Matthew 6:33; 16:19; et. al.].

Whatever days God may require believers to spend as aliens and sojourners in this sin-cursed world should be spent as a living sacrifice, wholly committed to carrying out the implications of the new commandment

given to them by their Lord and Master [Romans 12:1-2; John 13:34-35]. All that is expected of us can be fulfilled by humbly endeavoring to love one, another, as I have loved you. To help us understand how to do so, the NT has at least 58 one another instructions — not the least of which is the exhortation to carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ [Galatians 6:2]. That command alone should be sufficient to occupy most of the time and energy at our disposal. Given the clear NT mandate to commit all of our gifts, graces and resources to building up the body of Christ, therefore, how can we justify wasting precious time on such futile efforts to apply moral tourniquets on the sinful hemorrhaging of an unbelieving culture?

Jesus died and rose again for our sins as individuals. But his purpose was also to gather his redeemed from every tribe, kindred and tongue and unite them into one new man through whom he might display a new model to a watching world [Ephesians 2:14-22]. Through the power of his indwelling Spirit, Christ's earthly body has become a radical counterculture where forgiveness, reconciliation and love reign. As Francis Schaeffer put it, the local gatherings of God's people are to be visible settings where significant sociological healing has taken place.

But there are evil forces directed, against Christ's body. This is why it is also essential for us to be constantly engaged in building up the besieged walls of Zion. While we have Christ's assurance that the gates of hell cannot prevail against his church, we must not become complacent about our need to repair the breeches as they occur. In our day, there are many crumbling portions of Zion's walls that need our devoted attention. Church splits are rampant. Gossip, wrangling and all sorts of infighting are taking place in churches and denominations all over our nation. What possible biblical justification can we have for spending so much precious time and energy trying in vain to reverse the downward spiral of our American culture, when the walls of Zion are in such pressing need of repair? Christ never



commissioned us to force external reform on a wicked culture, but he has certainly given us a clear warrant for maintaining Zion's walls.

Does this mean we have no responsibility toward the lost outside of Zion's walls? Of course not! It is not our duty to morally reform them, however, but rather to evangelize them with the gospel. We must also welcome all who respond into the body of Christ and do all in our power to help them become functioning members of the new man, the true kingdom of Christ [cf. Colossians 1:5-13]. The agenda to "turn our nation back to its Judeo-Christian heritage" espoused by so many church leaders, therefore, is not a mandate from Christ, and can only serve to deflect his people from the responsibilities he has revealed and entrusted to them.

## **"We're Losing Our Rights & Freedoms"**

A few years ago, there was a popular song that included the line, "I beg your pardon, I never promised you a rose garden." Well, neither did Jesus. Contrary to the false "God wants you to be prosperous" gospel so prevalent today, Jesus told his followers,

If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first ...  
If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also  
[John 15:18, 20].

Paul understood what it meant to follow Christ when he told Timothy,  
  
everyone who wants to live a godly life  
in Christ Jesus will be persecuted  
[2 Timothy 3:12].

And yet, many Christian leaders seem to be incredulous when our government does something they interpret as persecution. We need to be reminded that the vast majority of Christians throughout history have had to, function under the shadow of hostile, even cruel governments. An argument can be made, in fact, that such is God's design. Under his

sovereign hand, persecution has often been the very instrument that has strengthened his people and spawned the spread of the gospel [cf. Acts 7:55-8:4]. Rather than to protest and complain, therefore, we should

rejoice in our sufferings, because we know  
that suffering produces perseverance;  
perseverance, character; and character, hope  
[Romans 5:34].

The battle-cry to fight for our “eroding” civil freedoms, therefore, is misguided. Our civil liberties can and may be taken from us, but our gospel liberty in Christ cannot be taken from us. A believer chained in solitary confinement is still “free” in the Lord. He is free to pray for those who misuse him and to take the opportunity to bring glory to Jesus Christ by his godly demeanor in the face of abuse. He is free not to render evil for evil and to return blessing in the face of cursing. And he is free, as opportunity arises, to feed and care for his enemy, for in so doing, you will heap burning coals on his head [Romans 12:20]. We must avoid the error of equating any civil liberties we may enjoy or lose with the spiritual liberty we always possess in Christ. When Paul wrote, where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty [2 Corinthians 3:17], he was not referring to civil liberties granted by “godly” governments, but rather to the inalienable spiritual liberties that are the inheritance of all in whom the Spirit of the Lord dwells.

### **"As You Have Opportunity, Do Good to All" (Galatians 6:10a)**

Instead of crusading and picketing against all of the perceived evils in our culture, believers would better glorify Christ by leading the way in concrete acts of kindness and love. Instead of complaining about our government's tendency to waste money on useless programs, believers should open their hearts and their purses to care for the poor and needy. Instead of blocking the doors to abortion clinics (or worse), they should open the doors of their homes to pregnant women who don't need a “Pro-life” lecture, but a clear presentation of the gospel and loving assistance in

carrying their babies to term. Instead of fighting to have “prayer in the classrooms” of our public schools, believers should be spending more time in prayer themselves. Instead of suing for the right to display a nativity scene in the public square believers should be “using the, public square” to tell anyone who will listen about the grace of God in Jesus Christ. These are but a few of the practical ways believers can demonstrate the love of Christ instead of becoming objects of ridicule by constantly engaging in all of the negative rhetoric about how bad our society is.

## **Is God A Republican?**

As we have contemplated these issues, we have become increasingly convinced that it is a serious mistake for believers to identify with any political party or “ism” in this world. Rather than to show a commitment to certain causes, identification with a particular political party has the effect of compromising the effectiveness of a believer's witness. By aligning ourselves with a particular political party, we often unwittingly alienate those who may identify with an opposing party, thus unnecessarily erecting a stumbling block that can only hinder the credibility of our witness to Jesus Christ. We are certainly free to evaluate the relative merits of the various political systems in our culture and to hold whatever convictions about such matters as seem appropriate in light of the teaching of God's word. But we also know that political affiliations are a source of much strife and contention all over the world. Should we not, therefore, avoid unnecessary alienation from those we hope to evangelize by not wearing such political convictions on our sleeves?

To the Jews, wrote Paul, I became like a Jew, to win the Jews ... To those not having the law I became like one not having the law . . . so as to win those not having the law. . . To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do this for the sake of the gospel, that I might share in its blessings" [1 Corinthians 9:20-23]. Should we not say, “To the

Republicans I became like a Republican to win the Republicans," or, "To the Democrats I became like a Democrat to win the ' Democrats'"? Again, we are not saying that we must chuck all of our private views and convictions about political issues. We are simply suggesting that the gospel would be better served if we kept such things to ourselves when witnessing to the lost.

We can illustrate this principle by considering a well-known preacher/politician. Assuming for the sake of our illustration that Jesse Jackson is truly the believer he claims to be, does his strong political association with the liberal wing of the Democratic Party and his identification with "black causes" serve to aid or hinder the effectiveness of his witness? Suppose he had a burden to share the gospel with an unsaved person who happened to be equally strongly committed to the conservative wing of the Republican Party. Do you really think that Mr. Jackson's political image would not create a stumbling block to sharing the gospel? Or, suppose he had a burden to witness to an unsaved white person who also happened to be an enemy of the government's "affirmative action" policies. Do you really think Mr. Jackson's well-known participation in "black activism" would not make it more difficult to gain the ear of such a person? Let's come at the problem from a different direction. When you hear the name "Jesse Jackson," what first comes to mind? Do you immediately think of one committed to the gospel of Jesus Christ, or do you picture someone well known for his political exploits?

Again, we have no reason or desire to cast aspersions on Mr. Jackson's profession of faith. Nor do we deny his right to hold whatever political views he deems appropriate. The issue is whether the public personality he has created for himself by his various political affiliations aids or hinders his effectiveness as a "minister" of the gospel of Jesus Christ. We think the latter. He has placed himself in a position where it is impossible for him to be "all things to all men." We could just as well have used Pat Robertson — another "preacher/politician" — to illustrate our point. All we would have to do is reverse the political party references. Considered together, in fact,

these two public figures illustrate our point even more poignantly. What if an equal number of believers who support each of these two men were to find themselves called to fellowship within the same local assembly? Do you think their political polarization would aid or hinder their willingness to make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace [Ephesians 4:3]? Would they be able to set aside their role as political adversaries to be of one mind [2 Corinthians 13:11] in spiritual matters? Not likely.

## **Persuasion vs. Coercion**

Many Christians have been duped into thinking that some sort of national renewal will come if we simply get more people registered to vote, elect the right candidates in office and pass legislation in line with the "Judeo-Christian heritage." Christian political activism is viewed as critical for the future of our country. For the Christian to place any hope in political systems is naive at best, and will only bring disappointment and disillusionment. Our confidence must not rest in such human devices, but in the power of the gospel to transform hearts in any culture. Politics inherently involves coercion. The gospel is spread only by persuasion. All too often, however, as Eric Hoffer observes, the church has relied on political coercion to perpetuate itself.

Prof K.S. Latourette, a very Christian historian, has to admit that *"However incompatible the spirit of Jesus and armed force may be, and however unpleasant it may be to acknowledge the fact, as a matter of plain history the latter has often made it possible for the former to survive."* It was the temporal sword that made Christianity a world religion. Conquest and conversion went hand in hand ... Where Christianity failed to gain or retain the backing of state power, it achieved neither a wide nor permanent hold ... It also seems that, where a mass movement can either persuade or coerce, it usually chooses the latter. Persuasion is clumsy and its results uncertain!

Such coercive tactics may have advanced the interests of the visible church, but they have never served, to advance the true kingdom of our Lord. Outward conquest and prosperity is not the measure of the true church's spiritual victory and strength. The external results of political activism and other coercive measures may give the appearance of success, but in the long run the effect has always been detrimental to the spiritual well-being of God's people. These are not the methods God has ordained to advance the kingdom of his Son. It is the faithful witness of God's people spread through humble persuasion that has divine power to demolish strongholds [2 Corinthians 10:4]. Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God [Psalm 20:7].

## **Caesar or Christ?**

There are two opposing voices calling believers to action at this point in the history of the church. We are being tempted to divert valuable energy trying to reclaim a nation with something less than the true gospel of Jesus Christ. The other voice is that of the Chief Shepherd himself calling us to focus instead on repairing the walls of Zion. The church's resources can either be spent attempting to establish a civil religion based on an alleged "Judeo-Christian heritage," or on building communities of faith as testimonies to the world of a better way through Christ. We need to pay attention to these challenging words from Larry Crabb:

In Christian circles, optimism typically is built on the idea that God's central purpose is to bless us with the kind of life we want or to transform culture into a friendlier environment for Christians . . . Christian leaders tell us that our prayers, activism, and united influence will turn our nation around and usher in a godly society. [They] may be guilty of distracting us from the real call of God. It is our individual lives and our Christian communities that must turn around. We must learn to continue serving Christ when problems come and to draw closer to Christ in the middle of unrelieved suffering. Whatever influence we have on culture must be the

product of a deep passion for God, a passion that makes us into attractively different people and keeps us struggling together in community that is imperfectly but genuinely loving.

Social crusading is so much easier than finding God. Fighting for Christian standards sometimes seems to involve a belligerence that compromises humility, or an aggression that masquerades as courage ... Neither social crusading nor solving our problems stirs the kind of self-awareness that lets us know that the real problem is within ourselves ... The great need of our day will not be met by training more counselors. It will not be met by leaders calling us to join the fight against moral pollution, in our society ... [We need] communities of people who care about outsiders and draw those outside into something they've never known but have always wanted. Communities of people whose passion for Christ is stronger than their grudges, their competition for recognition, and their jealous feelings... [Who] are so consumed with knowing Christ better that they hang in there through the messiness of community and never give up on themselves or others, because they know that Christ hasn't given up -- and never will.

There are many voices today calling us in many directions. Often, however, the one voice we should heed is all but ignored in the confusing din raised by the various recruiters competing for our time and energy.

In this brief article we have attempted to examine this troublesome teaching in the penetrating light of New Testament truth. We would encourage you to consider the issues we have raised in the spirit of the Bereans, who searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so [Acts 17:11].

There is certainly more that could be said on this subject, of course, so we have also provided a suggestion reading list on the next page for those who may be interested in studying this important subject in greater detail.

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