

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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Romans 1:7-10,16-25 "A Christian Nation"

It's often been said that America is "a Christian nation." In what sense is that true? Is it like saying "Saudi Arabia is a Muslim nation," or Indonesia, Egypt, Turkey; or like saying that New York is "a Catholic state"? All quite different, aren't they? Do countries like Britain, Germany, Denmark, Sweden, Norway with their "state churches" automatically qualify as "Christian nations"? And whatever it means that America is a "Christian nation," is that more true or less true today than in the past?

1) History

We have to start with our history. The early European settlers wanted religious freedom, and both the Episcopalians in Virginia (a colony since 1607 which included Long Island), and the Congregationalist Pilgrims in Plymouth, were explicit about their aims. The Mayflower Compact, signed off Provincetown in November 1620, said it well: "*Having undertaken for the glory of God, and advancement of the Christian faith, and honor of King and Country, a voyage to plant the first Colony in the Northern parts of Virginia...*" Those were explicitly Christian aims and claims.

A decade later, Governor John Winthrop called the Massachusetts Bay Colony "*a city on a hill*" - not (as people mistakenly think) from triumph, but from concern: "*For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us... if we*

shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken... we shall be made a story and a by-word throughout the world. We shall open the mouths of enemies to speak evil of the ways of God." That is a genuine Christian concern, that God's name not be shamed by the actions of his people.

But the Massachusetts Bay Colony became a thorough-going theocracy: you had to be a member of the Church - Congregational or Presbyterian - to take any part in public life or even to vote. Sabbath observance was compulsory, and unbelievers or dissenters were thrown in jail. Unsurprisingly, faith faltered, and by the mid-1700s, it was hard to find until the revivals we call "The Great Awakening," associated with John Wesley, George Whitefield, Jonathan Edwards. By the time of Independence, faith had waned again. Churches like this one had all but closed their doors - it was from a "remnant of the church that formerly existed in Wading River" that Rev. Daniel Youngs of Aquebogue reincorporated this as the Wading River Congregational Church in 1785.

In the new nation's manifestos we see what faith meant in public life. Jefferson's *Declaration of Independence* claimed that "*the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God*" entitled the colonists to assume their "free and equal station." He claimed that "*We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are*

Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness..." There is nothing specifically Christian about the founding documents; and indeed the Bible says nothing about political "liberty," nor about "the pursuit of happiness."

But of course Jefferson was not a Christian: he was a *Deist* who believed that "Nature's God... the Creator" started the world but now took no part in it; there are no miracles, prayer is not answered, and Jesus was not divine.

Among the Founding Fathers, the most orthodox was George Washington, a nominal Episcopalian who rarely worshipped and apparently left the service before communion. John Adams was a Unitarian who thought religion promoted public morals; Madison was another Deist, and helped Jefferson craft the *Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom* which forbade "compulsion" in religion. Jefferson of course famously favored "a wall of separation between Church and State." Madison's 1791 First Amendment wrote into the Constitution "non-establishment" and "free-exercise" concepts regarding religion, which have proved vital in its American development.

We could go on and talk about Methodist "camp meetings" and crusades on the western frontier, about evangelists like Charles Finney and Dwight Moody who mid-wifed two more "Awakenings" in the 1800s; about tens of millions of Irish and Italian immigrants who by 1850 made the Roman Catholic Church the largest church in the US. We could talk about Walter Rauschenbusch and the dire needs of poor working Americans that caused many Christians to join the Social Gospel movement. We could talk about distinctively American neo-Christian groups like Christian Scientists, Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons.

Does all of this add up to being "a Christian nation"? It's hard to see that it does. But here is what does: *the US today is numerically a very Christian country; more so than any other advanced western nation.* Over 80% of people in this country claim to be Christians. That fact, and our size and influence, mean that America still stands, for good or ill, "like a city on a hill" as Governor Winthrop foresaw - meaning that much of the world now learns what Christianity is like by looking at America.

2) What Is A Christian Nation?

What is "a Christian nation"? What would it look like? Remember that it's something the Bible gives no space to: Christian communities are expected to, and do, thrive in the middle of pagan cultures. Paul told the 1st century Christians in Rome that "*their faith was reported all over the world.*" Through Jeremiah the prophet, the LORD had told exiled Jews in Babylon to "*settle down... marry... have children... increase in number. Seek the peace and prosperity of the city the LORD had carried you to... pray for it, for if it prospers, you will prosper.*"

But what would a Christian *nation* look like? We might expect that the leaders of the nation would be Christians. We would probably expect to find churches on every corner, which would be full of worshippers on Sundays and of workers every day of the week.

How are we doing? Oddly enough, just to take a quick sample, our four most recent Presidents have probably been more overtly Christian and more theologically orthodox than the nation's first four. We certainly have churches everywhere, of every imaginable type, and though some are declining and closing, new ones are starting all the time and many large ones are flourishing. More Americans (over 40% of adults) are in church

on a Sunday than in any other advanced western nation (and more Americans *worship* on Sunday than watch all professional sports combined!)

We would expect that the laws and policies of a Christian nation would reflect Christian ethics. We would expect care to be extended to needy people, especially to the poor, the aged, the children, the sick. Unborn babies, frail elderly people, and those of any age with physical or mental disabilities would be especially well cared for and protected. To help people in these situations, we might expect to find either government-run programs or major Christian volunteer efforts or large not-for-profit organizations. How are we doing? Well in some areas, problematically in others, still very poorly in some. Worst, the sheer scale of these problems seems to be overwhelming us.

We might expect the culture of a Christian nation to showcase Christian values, morals, ideals, practices. We might expect great respect for family, for education, for creativity, for justice. We might expect that a Christian understanding of evil would mean careful restriction on violence, weapons, abuse, theft, drugs, hate-filled speech. We might expect a justice system that placed major emphasis on restitution and reconciliation, while knowing that society must be protected from those people whose violence is deeply rooted.

We might expect people to practice their belief that truth, justice, peace, are essential to a Christian culture; and that human flourishing requires that beauty and creativity are encouraged. We might expect that the culture: would know that community is worth more than individualism, that caring is worth more than competing, that Christian community is at the front edge of God's plans to make all of his Creation whole and good again.

We might expect that in a Christian nation, people would reflect the "image of God" in which they are made with humility, courage, responsibility, and care of others. We would expect that everyone knew that to be a Christian necessarily included being an example that drew others to Christ, and never doing or saying anything that would bring shame on the name of their Lord. We might expect deeply rooted religious tolerance, acknowledging that the work of God in the human heart and conscience is mysterious and personal. We might expect that a Christian nation would have so experienced *the amazing grace of God* that two things that flow naturally from it would be embedded in their culture: *loving God and loving neighbor*; or in more everyday language, *being grateful and being generous*.

How are we doing? Americans give more to charity, especially churches, than anyone; America gives more foreign aid than any nation; America has successfully absorbed tens of millions of immigrants and continues to do so with less fuss and less prejudice and less violence than almost any other country. Our nation pursues excellence in many, many, ways. The high points of our culture and of our national life are the envy of many people.

And yet there are aspects of American life that make the rest of the world wonder if this is what "a Christian nation" is really like. We seem addicted to money, sex and power, and have forgotten how to restrain these ancient giants. We tolerate more violence, imprison more people, produce and watch more pornography, use more street drugs, than is believable in a nation where over 80% of people claim to be Christians. One third of babies are conceived out of wedlock; one half of marriages fail; 1 million pregnancies are terminated every year; most young people have sexual experiences before the age of 17. Our law does not prohibit a procedure

which, as one Justice wrote, “millions find hard to distinguish from infanticide.” In some areas of public life, our Christian profession seems worn out!

3) *What Should We Do?*

What should America and her citizens do if we still wanted to claim to be “a Christian nation”? Understand history. Recognize that the US is likely to become more “Christian,” despite the growing numbers of “unbelievers” registered in polls, because of immigration. The great majority of immigrants are already Christians or become so when they get here. Recognize that “a Christian nation,” should not dishonor the name of Jesus Christ or give other nations a false impression of Christianity.

Understand that to be “more Christian” is not first about numbers, or about re-doubling effort, but about repentance, forgiveness, and the grace of God! When we seek God with all our hearts, when we learn to trust Jesus Christ and not our own achievements, then can we become what he means us to be. And that means not putting our faith in our personal or national achievements, our technological achievements, our moral achievements. Individually and collectively, we are simply not that “righteous” that we can claim to be examples of Christianity to others, and certainly cannot claim that God should reward us.

Experiencing the grace of God in Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us, is the only way to create a grateful and generous people who are learning how to “love God and love neighbor.” Not effort, not achievement, not pride, but repentance, trust, grace, are what can make us worthy individually and nationally to be called “Christian.”

Let us pray...