



SAFE HARBOR

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A Christian Nation?

I have been involved in discussions about the role of “Christian Ethics” in the life and policies of the United States of America. This brings up the question as to whether or not this is essentially a “Christian Nation”. Here are some thoughts on the subject that may shed some light on the topic and hopefully will give you a new understanding of the role of Christianity in the society and culture of America.

In the way of some background consider that the concept of “Christian Nation” comes from the edict of the Emperor Constantine who after a vision declared that the entire Roman Empire would be Christian and all other religions would be considered not to be sanctioned under the rule of the Empire.

The issue became somewhat cloudier when the Empire was divided into two parts, one centered in Rome and one centered in Constantinople. Within the Church structure there came a division between the Roman Church and the Eastern Church. This division developed into the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church with each one claiming primacy over religion.

The question remains as to whether or not this brought about a truly “Christian Nation” in either instance. Also note that the role of the church in the culture and government of the empires was very much a factor to be considered.

You cannot take a nation with many religions and suddenly do away with them. A result is that there evolved a syncretism which combined elements of the old religions into the Christian culture. This blending will cause the tenets of the Church to be weakened and a Christianity comes about that would be virtually unknown to the Christianity of the first century.

To this evolution of Church you might add the lust for power and wealth that pervaded the early Church and the empires that were built within the clerical hierarchy. It is said that power corrupts

and that absolute power corrupts absolutely. The Church, except for certain sects within, became enamored with wealth and gain. Its empires were grown by conquest and dominance over “primitive” peoples within the guise of spreading the Gospel. With this background it is time to move into the definitions that are appropriate to “Christian Nation”.

To be precise in our definition we need to look at the meaning of the word “Christian”. In the common use sense a Christian is one who is a member of one of the denominations of the Christian Church. This membership is usually obtained by going through certain rituals, Baptism, Confirmation, some form of membership class or just by accepting an invitation to join. Many consider themselves to be Christian because of this definition.

In the Biblical, New Testament sense, a Christian is one who has become a follower of the teachings of Jesus Christ, forsaking one’s previous life, opening themselves to the presence of the Holy Spirit who brings the presence of God into their person and living a life on faith in God. The new mindset of the individual is centered especially in the precepts of the Sermon on the Mount and the Beatitudes. The focus is the unconditional love of God as it applies to one’s life and dealings with others.

The wealth of the Christian is a wealth of faith in God and not a wealth of prosperity or gain. God does not promise a life without obstacles but the power and courage to overcome the obstacles we meet.

A nation is a large body of people possessing its own territory ruled by a unified government. This nation is of itself amoral. It is the common culture that determines the mindset of the nation. This is the point where a nation may be thought of as Christian, Islamic, Hindu, etc. So what does it mean to have a nation whose culture is predominately Christian?

Nominally America developed as a Christian culture. Its mores, law, sense of justice have come from the Judeo-Christian influence of the colonists who settled here. The glitch in the program is that the sinfulness of humankind has distorted the ideal and replaced it with greed, violence and an individual repulsion to having societal norms. In political cultures this is not uncommon and largely the reason that socialism, communism and dictatorships are destined to fail.

In an ideal Christian Nation violence, greed, hedonism and self-centeredness would become absent being replaced by love, hope, caring and sharing. Therefore what is your answer to the question, “Is the United States of America a Christian Nation?”

Reflections

“The true treasure of the Church is the most Holy Gospel of the glory and grace of God”.

These words were written by Martin Luther nearly five hundred years ago. In their teaching and meaning they are still most relevant and mostly ignored today. Those who would propagate a gospel of success, wealth and prosperity have distorted the simple beauty of the Gospel and made it something that it was never intended to be.

The essence of the Gospel is the restoration of our relationship with God which had been severed by sin. It involves faith, hope and love that comes from the Heavenly Father and keeps His children through trials and tribulations while journeying on Earth.

Paul delivers a strong message when he wrote to Timothy that “Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me...” The Greek states most clearly that Demas “agapes” the world and its temptations, violating the First Commandment as well as the commandment of Jesus that you should love the Lord, your God with all your heart mind and soul.

The 95 Theses of Luther were directed against the huckster of religion who promised a salvation in exchange for money. Peter confronted Simon Magnus for his thought that he could purchase God’s power for some money. The call from Luther was for a restoration of the most Holy Gospel of the glory and grace of God.

Words of Promise

¹¹ Dear friends, I urge you as foreigners and exiles to keep away from fleshly desires that do battle against the soul, ¹² and maintain good conduct among the non-Christians, so that though they now malign you as wrongdoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God when he appears. 1 Peter 2:11-12 New English Translation (NET Bible)