

“American Is a Christian Nation”

Half-Truth #6

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245 years ago. That is how long it has been since the Second Continental Congress met on July 4, 1776, and gave final approval to a Declaration of Independence of the American Colonies from Great Britain. It has long been considered the birthday of these United States of America and friends, I think it is a good day for us to do some reflecting on what it means to be a Christian and to be an American at the same time. We are in the midst of our series on Harmful Half-truths, and frankly, this is a topic where half-truths kind of proliferate. This morning we will explore some of those and my hope is that the Lord will grant insight and understanding which will help us be both faithful followers of Jesus and good citizens of the United States. Let's pause that through His word and by His spirit, the Lord would lead us in the truth today.

First half-truth. Our loyalty is to be the Lord, not to our country. After all, some say, the first of the ten commandments is “You shall have no other gods before me.” And the Lord Jesus says, quoting from Deuteronomy 6, **Luke 4:8 It is written, “You shall worship the Lord our God, and him only shall you serve.”** Then folks who have this view will add, **Philippians 3:20 But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior. The Lord Jesus Christ.** So some folks say, “Hey, I am a Christian, not an American. All this flag waving patriotism means nothing to me, and should not be important to you either.” Now, folks there is plenty of truth in this half-truth, but there is also significant error. People with this perspective forget that a primary loyalty does not exclude secondary loyalties. Honoring the Lord does indeed require that our primary loyalty belongs to Him. Yet, I also believe He is honored when we, as Americans, have an appropriate, secondary loyalty to the United States of America.

Where in the bible does it say that, Pastor Dan? The United States is never mentioned in the bible, at least not by name. But secondary loyalties are. For example, the Lord commands us to be loyal not only to Him, but also to our family. Though I am called to love every human being, I am also called to love my family, especially my wife and children, in a different way than I love other people. Our families are to be a secondary loyalty.

And there are other secondary loyalties as well, including this congregation. The apostle Paul tells us **Galatians 6:10 So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.** So though our ultimate and primary loyalty should always be to the Lord, it is appropriate to have a sense of loyalty to our country, to the United States, as long as that doesn't conflict or interfere with our responsibility to love, trust, follow and serve the Lord Jesus.

Now, some pastors and other Christians are concerned that evangelical Christians have been too focused on patriotism and claim we have often desecrated the cross by wrapping it with the flag. They even forbid the display of the American flag in their churches. Now, I know some of these pastors have good motives. But for a variety of reasons I believe they are making a mistake. For one thing I think, banning the flag is making a political statement and distorting the gospel. If you wonder what I mean by that, I would be glad to chat with you later. More important, I think these folks are ignoring the fact that loyalty to one's country is a virtue, as long as it is a secondary loyalty. Honoring men and women who have made great sacrifices on behalf of their fellow Americans though is a very appropriate thing to do. Now, I will say, if there ever comes a time when love of country is equated with love for God, or if there are people who put loyalty to the United States on the same level as loyalty to the Lord, then we have a problem. Then we are embracing idolatry. Then it is time for the flag to go. But until then, I will continue to encourage you to first, be faithful to the Lord Jesus, remembering your primary citizenship is in heaven, and second, be a good American citizen as well, because it honors the Lord and benefits the people around you.

Second half-truth. “We need to make the United States a Christian nation again.” Well, that sounds like a great goal, but I don't think the United States is or ever has been a “Christian Nation.” Being a Christian involves trusting and following Jesus Christ. That is something individuals do. In a sense, churches do that, but

not nations. It is true, however, that a large number of people in the United State profess to be Christians. Currently, about 73% of American adults identify as such. That number has gone down in recent years. From 1960-2015 those claiming to be Christian were between 80-85% of the population. And it is true that on July 4th, 1776, probably 98% of the country would have called themselves Christians. On the other hand, it is estimated that less than 25% of the American colonists attended church on a regular basis in 1776. The second great awakening, which began in the 1790's and continued through the early decades of the 1800's led to a much more active and devout religious expression. Interestingly, the peak of American church attendance was probably in 1950's when 60-70% of Americans were regular church attenders – that number is now about 37%.

For 245 years the United States has always consisted of many people who faithfully trusted and followed Jesus Christ. At the same time there have also been folks who rejected Christianity, some of them with great anger. A significant number of folks have admired Christianity, but kept their distance, while many others have filled their lives with diversions and tried to ignore Jesus Christ's amazing claims. Throughout all the years, the goal of those trusting and following Jesus has always been the same... make disciples. We have wanted more and more people to turn to the Lord and experience His amazing, saving grace. We have wanted those people to grow in their faith and to seek to honor the Lord in every aspect of life. The more that is happening, the more Christian this nation is becoming.

Third half-truth. “The Lord was clearly guiding those who founded this country.” I do think it is true that those men, and yes our political leaders in 1776 were pretty much all male, I do believe those men were in many ways guided by the Lord. But the story is rather complicated and often unclear. Some claim all the founding fathers were devout Christians, while others insist they were all deists. That means they believe God created the world, but was uninvolved in human affairs. He was like an absent landlord. Well, the truth is really in the middle.

Some, such as George Washington, Patrick Henry and John Jay were indeed devout Christians. Washington probably did pray at Valley Forge,

because he prayed wherever he was. Others, however, like Thomas Jefferson and Ben Franklin were hardly Christians. Remember, Jefferson would take a scissors and cut out the parts of the bible with which he disagreed. Some, such as John Adams, and John Locke... the man those writing did much to inspired the American revolution... seem to have been Christian, but with some strange theological views. Adams, for example, apparently had Unitarian sympathies and questioned whether Jesus was the eternal son of God. Folks, the American founders were a diverse group of fascinating, and rather amazing individuals. Some were solid believers, and others were deeply influenced by biblical Christianity even though their personal faith was rather thin. It would be foolish to idolize them, but equally foolish to ignore their remarkable contributions or deny that God used them to accomplish His purposes.

I also agree that God has worked in nation in and through the United States in amazing ways. Some of you have read the book, “The Light and The Glory” by Peter Marshall Jr. It provides a fascinating account of the many ways it seemed the Lord was working to establish the American Republic from the time of the pilgrims to the American Revolution. He also wrote “From Sea to Shining Sea” which chronicled events of the next 50 years, and then “Sounding Forth the Trumpet” which covered the time leading up to the civil war. Now, I do think Marshall does kind of look at American history with rose colored glasses, brushing over flaws, mistakes and sometime evil deeds of significant figures and events in American history. Yet, in some ways, his books provide a helpful corrective to what is taught in many high school and college history classes these days. The truth, and yes, when it comes to history there is such a thing as truth, particular events really did happen or didn't happen, but that truth is often a bit more complicated than some try to make it out to be. Christopher Columbus, for example, may not have been the devout Christian missionary that Marshall kind of portrays, but neither was he the blood thirsty murderer that Howard Zinn and others claim.

Friends, there was a time when American founders were seen as super heroes and almost worshipped by many in our country. Now, don't get me wrong, I think Mount Rushmore is a really cool place, but it would be easy to get the

impression that those four huge face carved in rock outside of Rapid City South Dakota are actually “gods,” not mere men. Yet, I am convinced that even when some of the exaggerations and embellishments are peeled away, there are still some amazing incidents of what appear to be God providently working to guide our nation on the path He desired.

For example, I suspect what happened in the summer of 1755 near what is now Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, was indeed a miracle. God seems to have intervened to spare the life of a man who He intended to use to form the United States. The British soldiers fighting French and Indian forces that day were amazed their 23-year old colonel, George Washington, was not even wounded in the battle, despite having two horses shot from under him and four bullet holes in his coat. Years later an aging Indian chief told the rest of the story to one of Washington’s sons. He had been leading his braves against the British that day. When He saw the tall officer riding his horse gracefully and seemingly without fear, up and down the battle line, he decided to focus on killing that officer. He ordered his braves to direct their fire on him. When the dozens and dozens of volleys had no impact, the chief said he became “convinced that the Great Spirit must have a brilliant future in store for the young officer who my braves miraculously couldn’t kill no matter how hard they tried.” Folks, did God intervene to protect George Washington so he could be “the father of our country?” I am not certain, but I have a feeling that Indian chief might just have been right.

Fourth. But what about slavery? Some say that the slavery practiced in the United States makes the American Revolution invalid. Since slaves didn’t enjoy life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, it makes the Declaration of Independence and empty document, with empty promises. Now, it is difficult to overstate the evil of slavery practiced in the United States before the Civil War. Whatever mitigating factors one might point to, it doesn’t change the fact that millions of human beings, individuals made in the image of God, were considered property and often treated like animals. In a variety of ways, American slavery was much crueller than the slavery in the Roman Empire which the bible talks about. Equally disturbing is that many people who professed to be Christians, including pastors,

defended slavery and argued it was something of which God actually approved. Slavery was a vile institution. That is true. However, I do not believe that truth diminishes what happened on July 4, 1776.

Recently, some have suggested that the reason for the American Revolution was because colonists feared the British government would soon abolish slavery and so independence was necessary to preserve that horrible institution. This, folks, is an example of revisionist history that fits a narrative, but contradicts the facts. Many who favored independence from Britain also wanted to abolish slavery. Yes, various political factors kept millions of Americans from experiencing the blessings of liberty for decades, but the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution laid the ground work which would eventually lead to the abolishment of slavery. The Declaration of Independence and American Revolution are beacons of political liberty that encourage people of all ethnicities, all over the world.

Incidentally, while the Declaration is not a Christian document, the founding principles it articulates clearly reflect bible principles. The American Revolution, and the American Republic, born with the U.S. constitution, were built on three important bible teachings. 1) Human beings are made in the image of God and possess dignity and an essential equality simply because they are human. 2) All human beings are sinners and fail to love God and other people as they should. 3) this corruption is not found just in individual, but in institutions as well. Thus, even though governments are ordained by God to reward good and punish evil, (Romans 13) checks and balances are needed to limit the power of government and keep it from violating the rights of its citizens. Christians should never treat the Declaration or Constitution as inspired scripture, but they are certainly documents we should appreciate and view as common grace gifts from God.

Fifth half-truth. “It is wrong to think of the United States as an exceptional country. God loves all the peoples of the earth and works through all nations.” Yes, that last sentence is true. God so loved the world, people from every part of the planet. And sent His son Jesus to bring them salvation. The Old Testament promise was that through the seed of Abraham, the Messiah, “all

the nations of the earth will be blessed.” The commission Jesus gives us as His followers is to go and make disciples of all nations. The vision the apostle John sees of the end of history is **Revelation 7:9, 10 A great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!”**

Folks, whenever a belief in “American exceptionalism” is used to justify feelings of ethnic superiority, or to diminish the importance of bringing the gospel of Jesus Christ to other parts of the globe, or to excuse sins committed by the American government or the American military, that is wrong. To suggest we as Americans are now God’s chosen people, just as Israel was in the Old Testament is close to blasphemy. Yet, I do believe the extraordinary liberty and prosperity this country has enjoyed should be attributed to the Lord. God has indeed blessed America. Now we are not the only country of which that is true. In many ways, Great Britain has been the recipient of God’s blessings in an equally amazing way over the centuries. **Psalms 33:12a says, Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord.** Though that was spoken directly to Old Testament Israel, the truth applies to any country. I think history shows that places where Christianity has flourished, have indeed enjoyed substantial blessings from God. It often takes generations for those blessing to build, and residual blessings continue even after Christianity is no longer flourishing. That is why Britain, where apparently the majority of people are now atheists, may seem to experience more blessings than Zambia where over 95% of the population identifies as Christian. But I expect that will change. When biblical Christianity takes root in a particular culture it tends to change that culture for the good. People often start to become more honest, more respectful of others and more responsible. Families and communities are strengthened. I believe that brings some natural blessings from God. We as American have enjoyed many of those blessing form 245 years, yet I fear the increasing secularization in our culture put those blessings at risk.

However, whatever blessings we as Americans do enjoy on the 245th birthday of our nation should be used in the right way. They should be used to glorify God and be a blessing to others. The best way to do that is to take the gifts and resources with which we have been entrusted, and use them to bring the gospel of Jesus Christ to those around us. No, the United States is not really a Christian nation, but those of us who are believers in Jesus Christ, are American Christians who can speak and act in such a way that the light and love of Jesus shines in every corner of our community and every corner of the globe. Friends, may God bless American and may God use us, American Christians, to be a blessing and bring glory to Him, each and every day.