

Christianity in America
Congressman Gary Palmer, speaker
June 30, 2019 • Evening Sermon

A lot has changed in the last 11 years when I spoke here at Briarwood. George W. Bush was President of the U.S. and Spencer Bachus was your congressman. I didn't have a beard. I have thought about what else has changed in the last 11 years. We are much more divided as a nation. We have a crisis on our hands that I think we have to think honestly to and be willing to acknowledge. The thing that bothers me most is how quickly we forget who we are.

I recently had a meeting on Capitol Hill and it was one of those clear nights. I was walking past the Supreme Court and got in front of the Capitol. It's rare that there is nobody there but that night there was nobody there. I could see the stars behind the dome and it was one of those times that it hit me where I was.

It happened to be a day or two before the anniversary of D-Day and the question popped into my head 'I wonder who was the first soldier to die that morning those boats hit those beaches and I wonder what he was thinking?' He may have been 19 or 20 years old and could hear those bullets hitting the ramp as the engines were turning trying to get them as close as they could to the beach. When the ramp came down did his foot ever touch the surf? I am amazed but what is even more amazing is that the guys behind him kept going not knowing how that day might end for them. For most of them it was their last day on earth but they were still committed to the cause that they were willing to give their lives for.

I think about how precious that gift of freedom that they laid on the altar and how it's rare how we really appreciate our freedom. There are maybe two or more generations that don't have that deep sense of obligation and responsibility that we should all feel for those who gave, as Lincoln said 'the last full measure of devotion.'

I am an amateur historian for I have a real sense of what is happening right now in this country. I think back to something David McCullough had written about a meeting that Ralph Waldo Emerson had with John Adams in 1825. Adams was 90 years old. Adams said to him, "I would to God there were more ambition in the country." And then he paused and said, "by that I mean ambition of the laudable kind, ambition to excel." That was 49 years after the Declaration of Independence so I had to ask myself, 'What did he see that was lacking in the American people at that time that he would say that?'

I wonder what Adams would say about us today, 243 years later. Adams and Thomas Jefferson was one of the key founders of this nation. I take people on tours at the Capital at night and I like to take them to the Rotunda. There are four paintings on the eastern side, four on the west and the first one of the west is John Trumbull's painting the signing of 'The Declaration of Independence.' When you look closely at that painting you will see that Jefferson is standing on Adam's toe.

Trumbull was a contemporary and knew both those men. He painted it that way because toward the end of their lives, after Jefferson had defeated Adams in the fourth presidential election, they became bitter enemies. They were estranged for years. Finally Dr. Benjamin Rush got them together toward the end of their lives and they restored their friendship. The letters that they exchanged are amazing to read. The issue that pulled them apart were their differences about how this public should evolve. It's a miracle that we not only defeated the British to gain our independence but that we survived the first 30 years as divided as we were then.

Adam's had gotten to the point where he thought we ought to have a monarchy because he didn't think we were capable of self-government without a permanent monarchy, a permanent senate. Jefferson on the other hand, was enthralled with the French Revolution even as bloody as it was, he thought it was worth it. Yet they both came together at the end and on July 4, 1826, 50 years to the day of the announcement of the Declaration of Independence, John Adams on his death bed, said 'Jefferson still survives' and then he passed away. Those were Adam's last words, but what he didn't know was that Jefferson had passed away five hours earlier.

Isn't it amazing in God's providence that these two men who were so much the principles behind the Declaration that defined what our country would be, would die on the same day 50 years to the day that the Declaration was announced? I think about that and the questions we ought to be asking ourselves today about what kind of nation we need to be and what kind of people we need to be and do we still have the capacity to govern ourselves? I think about something that former governor Richard Lamb of Colorado, a democrat, had written years ago in a magazine called Chronicles. He said 'Great nations need great citizens, because no matter the genius behind our Constitution or how well it's written, will not govern a people who have lost the ability to care.'

I wonder about that as I go to work every week and think about what we have lost. How many saw the Cathedral of Notre Dame as it burned recently? As I was watching it on TV I literally began to pray that they could put out that fire because I began to realize that we weren't just about to lose a building but we were about to lose something that was irreplaceable. Europe has become basically an agnostic if not an atheistic nation and Notre Dame was a symbol of what Europe was and what I think Europe could be if God in His mercy and grace were to bring about a Great Awakening, a great revival in the early 1700s that gave birth to this nation, could give a new birth to Europe. It then hit me that there are some things that are irreplaceable, things that we don't want to lose.

You might be surprised to know this but there are Bible studies every week in Congress. I attend a couple of them. One is where a group of us meet and we rotate meeting in each other's office. When it is in my office I lead it. One is led by Ralph Drollinger who is a retired professional basketball player who is 7 foot 2. In one of our Bible studies we had a guest speaker come in whose name is Rick Scarborough and during his lesson he made a statement about us who were members of Congress in which he said 'You are the best of the best, the cream of the crop' and I immediately had a check in my spirit because I couldn't agree with that.

When we finished I said to Rick, 'I need to take exception to that statement you made that we are the best of the best and the cream of the crop, because I'm certain that out of 325 million people there are people who are smarter and maybe more capable than us, maybe not every single member. I would say we're the willing.' That is the thing I think about when we go into elections and this is not a political speech. In general, who are we sending to represent us whether they are the city council, state legislature, governor, president or congress? And how many are willing to put themselves up for office.

My sister in law checks my FaceBook page but I don't. I used to have a personal FaceBook page but I shut it down because my wife and I got tired of seeing the comments that people send in. They are not very good. I got to thinking, why do people do that? I have pretty much decided that there are two groups that do it. There is one group that I think are sincerely distressed about the condition of the country and where we are going. I think they express it through social media because they don't feel like they have any other outlet. These are people that I think are seriously struggling with hope for our future.

Then there is another group. These are what I would call the paid assassins. They are there to say all kinds of evil about you, most of it being untrue. They are not really directing it to me or any of my colleagues but they are directing it to you, because they want to make sure that none of you would ever dare step up to the line and run for office. It's about one thing, it's about power. I think that is most of the people we are dealing with, those who are doing character assassinations through social media so that you have no confidence in the people that represent you and that you will not support anyone who runs for office because you have no confidence in anyone who would run for office. And so that you will never ever consider running for office yourself. I want to tell you that is incredibly destructive of our representative republic.

I didn't want to run for Congress. When Spencer Bachus was in office I had people tell me that I should run for office but I really didn't want to but I kept getting encouragement so I did what we all should do when we get messages like that, pray about it. I went into my closet and prayed about it. I don't recommend to start prayers the way I started this one but I said 'God, I don't really want to run for office or go to Washington but I'll go where You want me to go and do what You want me to do. I didn't want to quit my job in engineering to start the Alabama Policy Institute but this has worked out so if this is what You want me to do, give me a sign.'

I got up the next morning and received a text message that said 'Spencer Bachus has just announced he is retiring.' The Lord works pretty quickly sometimes. Initially I said I would and then went to Washington and spent about three days working on some stuff. I flew home on a Friday morning having a Jonah moment, where I wasn't waiting for someone to throw me off the boat but I was getting off the boat. I told our managing chairman I wasn't going to run for office and he wasn't happy about it. He wanted me to take the weekend to pray about it. I went home to tell my wife I didn't want to run and I thought she would be relieved because she has never wanted to be a part of politics. She doesn't like for people to ask her to stand up.

My wife said to me 'I have heard you say for years what is wrong with the country and that is you can't get good people to run. I have heard you compare it going to war, not necessarily like those men who hit that shore but it is a sacrifice. How can you expect someone else to go if you won't? I know this isn't what we want but I don't think it's about what we want but about what we're supposed to do and I think we're supposed to do this.' I knew then I had to do it and when I had to do it. That's the challenge I think we face.

We have to have people willing to be confronted by what the real need is and the real need is having Godly people in places of influence. It's not just in politics. It's in the pulpit. It's in the principal's office. It's in corporate America. It's in the hospitals, the banks and the universities. We have to be that leaven that leavens the whole loaf if we want to get our country back on the right track.

Great nations need great citizens and we have gone through a period of decline. I spoke to a group of junior and seniors at Birmingham Southern College back in 2008. These were all religion and political science majors. They were honors college students, supposedly the best of the best. I asked how many had ever heard of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and a professor said to them 'Come on' and one of them said 'Wasn't he on the cover of the Economist?' I said 'Yes, he just died (August 3, 2008).' The professor said 'Maybe they are not as well educated as I thought' and I didn't say it but I thought 'precisely.'

The reason I brought that up was because it was 30 years prior that Solzhenitsyn had given the commencement address at Harvard. It was entitled *The World Split Apart*. Solzhenitsyn was a Christian. He was a great writer who wrote the *The Gulag Archipelago*

(1973). He was a Soviet who was held in the Gulag, a forced labor camp system and that book threw so much attention on the Soviets they had to let him go and he was sent to the US basically in exile. During his address to Harvard he said 'If I were to be asked would I recommend the West as a model for our people (meaning the people of Russia) I would have to answer negatively. The West and its current state of spiritual exhaustion holds no attraction to us.' The interesting thing is what ended up happening over the next 10 to 11 years that I'm not sure Solzhenitsyn ever anticipated.

I said earlier I take people on tours of the Capital at night and I had 70 high school students there a couple of weeks ago, all from Alabama. I took them to the statue of Ronald Reagan and told them this wasn't the first time this country has faced a crisis for we have faced crisis before. We have gone through some really tough times and we're an amazingly resilient people and I told them 1979 was one of those times. In 1979 we have double digit unemployment, double digit inflation, and our consumer interest rates were double digit at 21 percent by the spring of 1980. The Soviets had troops in Central America, the Caribbean, and Central Africa and had invaded Afghanistan. There were 52 Americans being held hostage in our embassy in Tehran. Conservatives and Liberals alike, thought the Soviets had won the Cold War. I want to point out that this was not all that was happening in 1979.

In May of 1979, Margaret Thatcher was elected Prime Minister of Great Britain. Ronald Reagan was running for President and talking about how he would rebuild our economy and how he would defeat the Soviet Union, by saying they would become the ash heap of history. In June of 1979 Pope John Paul II went back to Poland, his native country and when he first announced he was going back the KGB (the Soviet Secret Police) considered having him assassinated but instead put atheism in the public school system for weeks ahead of his visit. They muzzled the Polish media to try to limit the number of people that would know he was coming. But when the motorcade took him from the airport into the old city of Warsaw there were a million people lining the streets chanting 'we want God!'

What I told those 70 high school students is that light will always pierce the darkness. About six days later the Pope held a Mass outside of the ancient city of Krakow where it had rained for two or three days and it was a muddy mess. They estimate that 2.5 to 3.5 million people gathered to hear that Mass. At the end of the Mass the Pope said 'Love is stronger than death. Faith is stronger than death. Do not despair, do not be discouraged, do not be defeated.' That was in June of 1979.

When Pope John Paul II died Peggy Noonan wrote a beautiful eulogy which was printed in the Wall Street Journal that said 'that statement at the end many historians believe that it became inevitable that the Soviet Union would collapse' but here is the rest of the story. Almost eight years to the day in June of 1987 President Ronald Reagan stood outside the Brandenburg Gate said "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!" Seventeen months later it was down.

If any of us were to have predicted in 1979 that in 10 years we would have gone through the greatest economic expansion the world has ever seen, the Iron Curtain will be down and the Soviet Union will become on par, people would have said we were crazy, but the whole world was changing. Most of us missed it. I believe we are in one of those moments.

The last major speech Reagan gave was in Houston in 1992 at a Republican National Convention. At the end of his speech he quoted a man named James Allen who had written in his diary 'that most thinking people believe that America has seen her best days' on July 26, 1775. The whole world was changing and Mr. Allen missed it.

So as those 70 high school students were look at the statue of Ronald Reagan, standing under the dome in the most powerful nation in the history of the world, I said ‘history is being made. Don’t miss it. Be a part of it.’ The statue stands on a granite pedestal that is kind of beige in color except for a strip toward the top that is kind of greenish gray in color which represents the Berlin Wall. How appropriate that the guys who stood and challenged Mikal Gorbachev to tear down that wall, his statue stands on part of the wall. I told them that to let them know there is hope. Where the Spirit of God is, where the people of God are willing to sacrifice, to give of themselves, put the interests of others before their own, and to live out the admonition in Philippians 2:3–8, great things can happen. We have seen it before.

I want to challenge the church. I feel like the church has failed. It’s failed, not necessarily in proclaiming the Gospel but making the Gospel relevant to where we are today and challenging people to live as Christ would have us live. We have gotten caught up in material things but if you look at the suicide rate, the drug overdose rate and the other issues we’re dealing with it should be very evident that material blessings will never satisfy the longings of the soul. They don’t make for great community. They don’t make for great nations. A Roman historian named Levy said ‘Luxury is more ruthless than war. War will kill the body but worship of wealth and luxury will kill the soul.’

I think we have failed in preparing our children to lead. I can tell you this with absolute certainty, the young people of today are going to lead one day because they will wake up one morning and the people they have come to depend on won’t be here and so it will be left up to them. So I think each one of us should have a real sense of responsibility and obligation to prepare them when that day comes because that day will come. I think we need to be preparing people right now to take our places when we leave. I know that our pastor understands the connection between faith and practice and that practice applied to every sphere of our country whether it’s the pulpit or the speaker’s podium in the United States House of Representatives.

We also have to do a better job of emphasizing that freedom depends on virtue. Oz Guinness has developed this little formula that says ‘freedom depends on virtue and virtue depends on religion and religion depends on freedom.’ I don’t think there has ever been a time in the history of the United States when our faith has been under such vigorous attack. This church has experienced some of it. There are social media attacks on that as well. Freedom depend on virtue. John Adams said that our Constitution is made only for a moral and a religious people. As Guinness said with his formula, it has to come together.

We have to have faith in one another. This is what I see on a regular basis within the House of Representatives, working on legislation that you would think we would all be behind but we’re so divided because we no longer have faith in each other. Some say if we’re to maintain a representative of the American republic we must have faith in each other’s purpose and hope in each other’s future and then charity for each other’s shortcomings. There is no forgiveness in this country anymore. Have you thought about that?

The whole basis of what we believe hinges on the hope and the promise that our sins have been removed as far as the east is from the west. We are not only forgiven by our God through the blood of Jesus Christ but we have the ability to forgive others because we see each one in our own fallen state of humanity. But we’re losing that in our country today.

I want to share this speech I read. It says “No material progress, even though it takes shapes we cannot now conceive, or however it may expand the faculties of man, can bring comfort to his soul. It is this fact, more wonderful than any that Science can reveal, which gives the best hope that all will be well. Projects undreamed-of by past generations will absorb our

immediate descendants; forces terrific and devastating will be in their hands; comforts, activities, amenities, pleasures will crowd upon them, but their hearts will ache, their lives will be barren, if they have not a vision above material things. And with the hopes and powers will come dangers out of all proportion to the growth of man's intellect, to the strength of his character or to the efficacy of his institutions. Once more the choice is offered between Blessing and Cursing. Never was the answer that will be given harder to foretell." This was a speech given by Winston Churchill in December of 1931.

It is prophetic. We still have that choice between blessing and cursing. It's a choice we still must make while we still have the power to choose between blessing and cursing. Whether you realize it or not you're making that choice in how you use your time, how you spend your resources and how much you're willing to put into your church, community and country.

As I said before, we are a resilient people. We're an amazing people. We're a people of hope and capable of great things, able to endure, persist and prevail over all of our difficulties and that's our history. Our history is not a bunch of names, dates and facts. It's about failures and successes. It's about learning what worked and what didn't work. It's being smart enough not to repeat the mistakes of the past and willing to try the things that will make us better people.

On the eastern side of the House of Representatives there is a mural. It's a painting of the signing of the Constitution. In the painting behind the desk is President George Washington presiding over the Convention and right in the middle of the painting, very prominent, is Benjamin Franklin looking out at the people viewing the painting. He is sitting in a chair with a cane in his hand. I like to do this with members of Congress and people that I have with me on some of these tours, where I point to chair that sits behind Washington which is called the Sunburst Chair. In Philadelphia at Independence Hall you would see that chair that sits in the very room where Washington resided. Franklin made this observation, 'I have often looked at that chair during these deliberations and asked myself 'is that sun rising or is that sun setting?' and I concluded that it's a rising sun.'

What I would like to say to my fellow members and what I say to you today, is whether that sun continues to rise or not is entirely up to us so I encourage you to hold firm to your faith, persist, prevail, engage in the scroll, and make that choice. I pray that God will guide us in all the choices that we have to make because our future depends on it. God bless you. Amen.