

“Christianity In America – Past, Present, Future”

Proverbs 14:34

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This is God’s Word that is inerrant and infallible. Psalm 16:5-6 says *[5] The LORD is my chosen portion and my cup; You hold my lot. [6] The lines (of life) have fallen for me in pleasant places; indeed, I have a beautiful (goodly) inheritance.*

The grass withers, the flower fades, the Word of our God abides forever and by His grace and mercy may His Word be preached for you.

It seems like yesterday but 23 years ago I had the privilege to be called to serve this congregation here at Briarwood Presbyterian Church as pastor, following the 40 year wonderful ministry of our pastor emeritus, Dr. Frank Barker. I arrived at this church in September 1999. As I met with various teams, leaders, sessions and diaconate I found out one of the things going on here was a patriotic rally and we talked and prayed about how to build on that. I made a proposal which was discussed and the session wonderfully and unanimously adopted it in the fall of 1999. That was that we begin on the Sunday evening closest to July 4th, the nations celebration of the birth of the nation, called Christianity **In** America. The operative word is ‘in’ as we would take a look at what has happened through Christianity, the work of the Gospel through the church of the Lord Jesus in the preeminence of Christ in this nation. Also, how the Lord has blessed it, what we need to consider in terms of lament and repentance and what we need to commit to in terms of future ministry – past, present and future.

How is it that we can go about this in a way that would honor the Lord? Our country has set aside July 4th as a celebration of the birth of a nation on a yearly basis as we are getting close to 250 years. How can we as Christians participate from a Biblical world and life view? This is why we are taking the time to know how to embrace this occasion thoughtfully as those who are committed to Christ as Lord and Savior. As a pastor I get to meet a lot of people because we support a lot of missionaries who are on the mission field and they have children. Many of their children have dual citizenships due to their parents being American and the nation where they were born.

The reality is if you have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior you have a dual citizenship. The Apostle Paul says abundantly, clearly, astonishingly, accurately that our citizenship is in the Kingdom of heaven. Philippians 3:20-21 says *[20] But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, [21] who will transform our lowly body to be like His glorious body, by the power that enables Him even to subject all things to Himself.* Peter identifies it as we are citizens of a royal nation (I Peter 2:9) yet we have responsibilities and Peter tells us how to fulfill those responsibilities in an earthly nation – how we fulfill our affection to Christ our King in His Kingdom (an eternal transcendent Kingdom) as we dwell in the kingdoms of men, the temporary kingdoms of this world. These are not equal existences or status. The Kingdom of God and my citizenship there is clearly superior and supreme in my allegiance and affections to any other kingdom. In fact, if the nation where I dwell on this earth causes me to transgress the law of my King (God) then I must obey God and not the kings of this world, no matter if it’s a death resulting consequence.

It gets even a little more dicey for us as Christians, because as Christians our eyes are on what God is doing throughout the world. In different places in the Psalms talks about our desire to live for our King and Lord in such a manner as we fulfil the Great Commission that all the

nations will be glad. We have a Great Commission that we are to make disciples of all the nations. How does that fit into patriotism – love, affection and allegiance in your own country?

There are two errors that we have to avoid. One is in our patriotism to remove the influence and directives of Christianity which leads to nationalism and that's idolatry – where a nation takes the place of God. Then your religion becomes a tribal god for that nation. Jesus is not the tribal God in the nation in which I live for He is King of all the nations. On the other hand, do I then detach myself from any affections and allegiance within a nation where I reside by adoption or birth – does that honor the Lord? Clearly, in the Bible that's not the case.

If I am going to commit myself to bring the Gospel of the Kingdom to all the nations, how can I do that with integrity if I'm not showing priority to my own nation? We see the book of Acts unfolding with bringing the Gospel to all the nations and clearly there is a place for Christian patriotism in the love of my country with its celebrations. My Christianity is not a use of the religion to serve the nation for it is a glorious King whom we call upon our nation to serve. We call upon our nation not under God as a motto but under God as a reality yet I do this not out of detachment but out of affection and allegiance.

As I think through this I'm grateful for church histories so that we have examples all the way back to the Bible where we see how Paul sees the claims of King Jesus all over the nations but his calling is to take the Gospel to the kings, governors and all the Gentiles of those nations. Yet Paul says in Romans 9:3, *[3] For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh.* We see the same heart in the Reformers. There is no doubt when we read about Calvin that he had a commitment to bring Christ to the world and he sent missionaries and preachers all over the world but he sent 1300 to France, the nation of his birth and kept up correspondence with them. He made both public and secret trips to visit them while they were under persecution to encourage them, because of his love of France, his own nation. He realized the priorities of these matters. His heart for the world is not in conflict with his priority, affection and a love for the nation of one's birth.

Look at John Knox for he is under a death warrant from the Queen and lands on the shore as he makes a prayer; 'God, give me Scotland or a die.' His patriot affections are not in conflict with his mission to the world, but as a testimony of it and an initiation of his love for all the nations. We also see it in the great English Reformer – Latimer, Ridley, Cranmer. They had a faithfulness to Christ in a University town of Oxford and on a drab, cold October morning the fires of martyrdom consumed them yet their last words were 'be of good courage for by God's grace today we shall light a candle for Christ that shall not be put out in all of England. So, I gladly embrace a Biblical doctrine of Christian patriotism so that the claims of Christ are brought to the nation in the desire that God's grace would be shed upon that nation and then through that nation to all the nations of the world through Christ's church and His people.

What would be the framing principles for us to engage in such an activity? I want to give you three principles very clearly on this. The three words I want you to remember are celebration, contemplation and consecration. I would approach the celebration of the birth of this nation with those three words with Christian patriotism. In the order of words nouns and verbs are powerful and helpful but adjectives and adverbs control everything. I am a Christian citizen. I am a Christian husband. My love for Christ is not threatened by my love for my wife unless I make my wife an idol in my marriage, but my love for my wife is most profitable not when I treat her as if she is capable of being my Savior, but out of love to my Savior love my wife. My children can not be profited if my life revolves around them for I'm actually reinforcing their sin nature if I do. My children can only be blessed if out of my singular, full,

allegiance to Christ I know how to love them as a Christian father. Now the great fun is doing it as a Christian grandfather. Then beyond that is being a Christian employer. If my life revolves around my business where it's my identity not only will I be an unprofitable businessman but I will also be unprofitable for those who work for me. We need to understand we are a Christian business person in our vocation in life.

The same thing is true of citizenship for you can love that nation and through that nation, the nations of the world with the supremacy of your love for Christ and your sufficiency that is found in Him. Let's go back and take a look at the Psalm I read at the beginning of our study. Let's take a closer look at the Psalmist's relationship with the Lord and its supremacy and sufficiency.

Psalm 16:5-6 says [5] *The LORD is (1) my chosen portion and (2) my cup; (3) You hold my lot. [6] The lines (of life) have fallen for me in pleasant places; indeed, I have a beautiful (goodly) inheritance.*

The Lord is the One on whom I rely for life. He is my Refuge, my Redeemer and the One who chose me I now choose to follow. He is my Cup for He is the One who sustains me. He is the One who holds my lot for He is the Lord of my entire life. Now, where do I live? I live in His Providence. The Psalmist sees where he lives when he says, 'the lines of life have fallen for me – God has placed me in life – in pleasant places.'

I can bear testimony to this. I was born in a state that I love – North Carolina. I lived in a city for the most part growing up that I liked – Charlotte. Now I have an adopted state that I love dearly – Alabama the beautiful. I'm grateful for the locality where I live for to me it's beautiful. I marvel at God's handy work all around it. I don't live in a perfect nation but I am grateful for God's Providence in my citizenship. It's a goodly heritage, not a perfect heritage. The same thing is true for my state. I have the opportunity to serve the Lord with the answer to its imperfections and sins – the Gospel. The same is true for the city I live in. The same thing is true in my life. I'm grateful for my great grandfather, grandfather and the family God had put me and given to me. It's not a perfect family but it's a goodly family of God's covenant mercies. I can sinfully put that in place of the Lord but to properly appreciate it, celebrate it and love it I can do so in the supremacy of the Lord and give Him praise for it.

That's why one of the first things we learn to do in life is rejoice in the celebrations of God's Providence to us in the context of life, the nation we find ourselves in – our home nation or our adopted nation. We live in a nation that is unique in many senses not the least of which, it's a nation of immigrants – waves of immigrants from the 17th century on. What would draw them here? It's not a racial identity for there was something else they were coming to and that's why it was called the Melting Pot yet we've since lost it. I will address further toward the end how that Melting Pot can heat again as one instead of what we see today which is a smorgasbord or salad bar of hyphenations – Asian Americans, African Americans, etc. Before it was 'I want to be an American.' I will give you some thoughts about what made it this way for it was around an idea, certain values, a commitment that were unique to that national experience. That becomes something to celebrate, something to consider – the pleasant places of the nation, the state, the locality where we find ourselves. It's not a perfect one by any means.

When you gather to celebrate July 4th will you recognize that there will be improvements to make on our family? Sure. Is it right to talk about those things? Sure, but is that the way we start? No, you will start your celebration by telling stories of your family and laughing and rejoicing, then you build from that and correct from that. When Paul had churches he needed to correct but his opening chapters would bring what they could rejoice and celebrate together.

That is where you as a Christian, start your love of Christ manifested in a Christ honoring love of the nation where you find yourself and there is much to rejoice in.

I recently had a number of district attorneys, prosecuting lawyers and law enforcement, learning leadership principles on the battle field of Gettysburg and as we walked through all of that on the last moments we had there we went to the National Cemetery where Lincoln stood to give that momentous Gettysburg Address, that would account as one of the top three presidential addresses in the history of the US. I showed them the language of Christianity in that address that had impacted Lincoln's life in 1862 and 1863 through various dynamics of God's Providence – a nation that would be born again, a new birth – a nation under God and that would sacrifice for other's freedoms drawing upon the great sacrifice of Christ who set us free from our sins. We are a unique nation, called by many the American experiment. Lincoln then gives a famous phrase that capture this in his address that says 'A nation conceived, birthed, in its embryonic state forward in liberty and freedom.' Not properly applied will cost 700,000 lives and in that very cemetery would be many of them.

'Conceived in liberty' – do you realize how unique that is? Show me any other experiment of national government that begins with the freedoms of the people that the government is to protect. I can show you governments that say they will give freedoms to people. Find me one that protects God-given freedoms – limited government that exist by a transcendent law codified in a national law called a constitution, designed for a government to be focused on the protection of those liberties, a government of the people, by the people, for the people, existing primarily to protect the people and those liberties.

We didn't establish a monarchy where all the citizens exists for the monarch or a dictatorship where you have one man's strengths and also his weaknesses or an oligarchy where the powerful and the influential bond together to rule over everyone or a democracy that can turn into mob rule nor did we have a nation of anarchy where every man does what is right in his own eyes. We had this unique experience where people lived in covenant around a law and the law was king. The people selected their representatives who took oaths not to the people but to that law in order to protect the people and those liberties. This is unique and imperfect in our experiences and I don't know of it in any other place. I know pieces of it and attempts of it but nothing that exists like it. We have a constitutional republic – a representative government, and the freedoms protected – that is what draws people to freely leave hearth and home for another hearth and home.

I'm going to give an illustration but please don't think of politics as I give this. My heart broke when I read of people who have fallen prey to deceitfulness, had been abandoned and then their desire to get to this nation ended up dying in a trailer detached from the truck that brought it. There were over 50 people who died having risked everything to get somewhere for something. I understand the politics of what happened here but try to put yourself in the desperate hearts and hopes of those people. This is just looking at what it is that would cause someone to do this. You either were born in that nation or you were able to adopt that nation by immigration. Is that not something we should celebrate and give thanks for? It is because of God's Providence not of our doing. So, we celebrate these things because God has granted them to us.

We find ourselves in a nation under God and what an amazing thing that Lincoln also affirmed. It was George Washington's desire that that become our motto – under God. It is not a theocracy but a theistic nation. We declare our freedom with a declaration that says our freedoms are secured by God's Providence and are revealed by nature and the God who made

that nature. Then when that independence and liberty is won, instead of every man doing what is right in his own eyes in the name of that freedom, we ordered our freedom under self control with a constitution that four times affirms the God whose transcendent law is the foundation of that constitutional law. Then we set up a third document called the bill of rights which is there to mature and maintain that freedom because it was imperfect at the outset of the country and remains imperfect to this day. What is the way to mature it, maintain it and deal with those national sins and imperfections? There was the first amendment with five affirmations that were hardly discussed because everyone knew what we were trying to get to – the free practice of religion, free speech, free assembly – and without that these freedoms will dissipate.

We don't just have the freedom to meet once a week but we have the freedom of theology even in the public square. We have a state that doesn't pick the religion but protects the free exercise of religion and a church that doesn't control the state but takes advantage of the freedom to do church to the glory of God as a Great Commission and Great Commandment church. This is unique where limited government protects the free practice of religion by churches and the individual Christian – tied to that is freedom of speech and freedom of assembly. That is something unheard of anywhere else – pieces of it but nothing like it. This is something we rejoice and celebrate. This wasn't even a debate when it was brought up to become law because they knew a nation governed by law was where the law is king, not a man, can't be done without a people of restraint and external restraints of law will not accomplish it for they have to have internal restraints.

This is why the French author and political scientist Alexis de Tocqueville wrote, "Not until I went into the churches of America and heard her pulpits flame with righteousness did I understand the greatness and genius of America. America is great because America is good. If America ever ceases to be good America will cease to be great."

The second is contemplation and here is what you are to contemplate. Number one, God is sovereign over all nations, including this one. Whether we put 'under God' on something, it's true. There was a nation that existed that God used to discipline His people and that nation is known as Babylon. The emperor, king and dictator of that nation decided he was worthy of that worship. Daniel wouldn't do it. God sent the king a dream that caused him problems. Daniel interpreted the dream and basically said 'Nebuchadnezzar, you're arrogant and proud and you think that you're god so God is about to discipline you.' It is called boanthropy which is a disorder where a person lives in a field like an animal. Daniel 4:24-27 says [24] *"This is the interpretation, O king: It is a decree of the Most High, which has come upon my lord the king, [25] that you shall be driven from among men, and your dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field. You shall be made to eat grass like an ox, and you shall be wet with the dew of heaven, and seven periods of time shall pass over you, till you know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will. [26] And as it was commanded to leave the stump of the roots of the tree, your kingdom shall be confirmed for you from the time that you know that Heaven rules. [27] Therefore, O king, let my counsel be acceptable to you: break off your sins by practicing righteousness, and your iniquities by showing mercy to the oppressed, that there may perhaps be a lengthening of your prosperity."* That is exactly what happened as God broke Nebuchadnezzar.

I believe God converted Nebuchadnezzar after this and here's why. Daniel 4:34-37 says [34] *At the end of the days I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven, and **my reason returned to me**, and I blessed the Most High, and praised and honored Him who lives forever, for His dominion is an everlasting dominion, and His kingdom endures from generation to generation;*

[35] *all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, and He does according to His will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay His hand or say to Him, "What have you done?"*

[36] *At the same time **my reason returned to me**, and for the glory of my kingdom, my majesty and splendor returned to me. My counselors and my lords sought me, and I was established in my kingdom, and still more greatness was added to me. [37] Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and extol and honor the King of heaven, for all His works are right and His ways are just; and those who walk in pride He is able to humble.*

Whenever you think you are god you actually become like an animal and your head goes down. When you recognize the one true and living God, then you look up. You lift your eyes and now you begin to worship. When you begin to worship, reason returns to us. This is why I labor on gathered worship and lifestyle worship, because worship is the foundation, fountain and framework of all of life. If we can't honor the Lord in gathered worship on Lord's Day it will not be seen on the other days. We see a part of the Lord's prayer here in verse 35 'may Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven...' The Lord not only rules in the heavens but He rules in the earth. No one can do anything to stop His purposes. As his reason returns, instead of a culture of insanity, immorality, absurdity, and lethality, it's not rational. As this happens, as before when they used to avoid him due to the fact he was in the field eating on grass, now they seek him, want him and need his counsel. More greatness was added to Nebuchadnezzar, why? It is because now he had it right and instead of using the power God gave him to elevate himself over God, he now becomes a steward of it before God. Nebuchadnezzar was prime example of someone walking in pride and he was first to admit it. He learned that God is sovereign over all the nations and he praised Him.

God started all the way back with Abraham is using the nation that He is maturing and mobilizing through the nation (Egypt) He is using to put you (His people) in slavery and then He will use His nation to bring judgment on those Canaanite nations due to their paganism. Then He judges the nation of Egypt that judged them in slavery. God is sovereign over all nations. He does as He pleases for His glory and for the good of His people, even in a fallen world. God used the Assyrians to deal with the ten tribes and used the Babylonians to deal with the other two tribes. Then He brought judgment on the Assyrians, Babylonians and the Medo-Persians. This is the hand of the Lord.

All nations are accountable to God. Psalm 67:4 says [4] *Let the nations be glad and sing for joy, for **You judge the peoples with equity and guide the nations upon earth.*** God guides the nations and they all have to give an account to Him. That includes the nation we live in and this nation needs a church to remind them. Under God doesn't just need to be our motto but it needs to be our consciousness as a nation. Our sins cry out into the heavens and God will not be mocked. We are accountable to Him.

God has a Word for the nations. Here is God's Word for all the nations including ours. This Word is given in parallelisms for it's in a Hebrew genre of writing wisdom literature. It is an antithetical parallelism as it gives the positive and then the negative. Proverbs 14:34 says [34] *Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people.* God is telling us here through His Word that a nation's whose public policy is framed by His transcendent law – the nation's laws are framed by God's sanctities – that nation receives blessings. It doesn't mean that everyone is saved who are living in that nation, but it means when public theology forms public policy in that nation then that nation is blessed. When sin becomes the public policy of the nation it's a reproach to any nation.

We are living in a nation that desperately needs public theology to inform its public policy and then will come blessing, but if sin rebellion and treason against the Almighty our laws become instruments to rebel against God's law – like the sanctity of life, marriage, family, gender, truth – then the presence of sin becomes a reproach that brings us under the discipline and judgment of God.

Here is the consecration reflection. Celebrating God's past blessings, contemplating the present reminders – the sovereignty of God over all nations, accountability to God of all nations and God's Word to the nations – exalted nations are those who are framed by the truths of His law in public policy, but when our law becomes instruments of rebellion it becomes a reproach. How can any nation made up of citizens who are born under the dominion of sin ever embrace public policy that is informed by the transcendent law of God when we are at enmity against God? Here's another question. How can a nation led by leaders who see themselves as God intoxicated by their status, power and authority by led to embrace policies subservient to and embracing God's transcendent law? The answer is in my takeaway.

The takeaway is Christ's church in this nation is the embassy and message of the Kingdom of God. It is those of us with dual citizenship – citizenship in this nation and the Kingdom of God. The church as the embassy of the Kingdom of God unalterably committed to the Great Commission of making disciples as those disciples become ambassadors of the King of Glory also become the salt of the earth and a light to the world. These disciples are produced from Great Commission and Great Commandment churches who know how to walk humbly before God, do justice and love mercy. These Great Commission Christians have been disciplined for the preeminence of Christ in all things and know how to eat, drink and whatever they do they do all for the glory of God. This is the venue that brings God's grace to work in a nation and affected in redeeming grace through saving people by the Gospel and common grace in restraining sin. Being the salt of the earth we restrain sin in common grace and being light to the world we bring redeeming grace that transforms sinners.

Please God let this church like never before be a church on mission – making disciples – on message – teaching all that God has commanded – and in ministry – worship, evangelism, discipleship and prayer. We need a Gospel resurgence. We have been blessed with a Great Awakening from 1735 to 1765 that gave birth to the nation. There was another Great Awakening in the midst of the horrors of the nation and we have been blessed by that Gospel resurgence so that evils such as race based chattel slavery have been eradicated, arrogance has been eradicated and recently the Dobb's case that overturns Roe and Casey.

If we were a monarchy and our president was king, do you think Roe would have been overturned? No. If we had taken a democratic vote right now, would it be overturned? No. If the oligarchy, the powerful in our country were making the decision, would it have been overturned? No. It was our God's Providence. He has done it for His glory. There is no longer a death warrant for the unwanted, inconvenient and imperfect. I'm not referring to atopic pregnancies or still births. Now that this has become removed may it become unimaginable and that happens through the salt and the light.

When my family gets together to celebrate July 4th we have what is known a corn on the cob on steroids that my wife makes. It is wonderfully delicious! My grandkids will ask my wife what makes it so wonderful and she will say the salt and the butter. They don't say 'Grandma, this was great salt' but it doesn't take much salt if the salt is salty. Then whatever it salts becomes a goodly heritage, a pleasant place – on mission, on message, in ministry – Gospel resurgence! Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, thank You for the privilege to unfold Your Word. I love You Father and I pray that those reading this will be able to download and celebrate Your good blessings, see the framework of a sovereign God over all, in all and through all, tomorrow and constantly in life. Help us consecrate ourselves to be Christians that are salt and light, disciples and grown by Your grace in faithful Great Commission, Great Commandment churches and it's all to the praise of Your glorious grace. When we pray, God, shed Your grace for we are committed to the praise of Your glorious grace, in Jesus' Name, Amen.