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Where's my Christian nation? 7.19.9

In **Leviticus 11:45**, God commanded Israel with these words: **"I am the LORD who brought you up out of Egypt to be your God; therefore be holy, because I am holy."** In context, that command came as application to some of the OT food laws – God was telling them "You are going to eat differently than other nations because you ARE different; you are set apart to be holy." But the principal went beyond food laws and even beyond the OT Law itself, which is why we find it repeated for us in **1 Peter 1:14-16**: **¹⁴As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. ¹⁵But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; ¹⁶for it is written: "Be holy, because I am holy."**

I start with that because this sermon, "Where is my Christian Nation?" is about the question of whether or not our nation is, was, or can be a Christian nation, and I don't want to water down the term Christian, as we sometimes do when we talk about a Christian nation.

This sermon grows out of the prayer cards you filled out on Independence Day weekend. As I go along, I'm not going to use the Bible as much as I usually do, but stick with me while I set things up. I will get back to it before we're through, and there is a reason for it.

Our recent survey: "My greatest prayer concern for our country"...127 concerns in all, but that isn't an exact count of the number of surveys. Some I classified under two different topics:

- 40 for Christian nation (many of which said "BACK to a Christian nation")
- 31 for social and political concerns, 8 of which mentioned abortion
- 24 for the church – repentance, return to holiness
- 15 for guidance – for our leaders, for Christians
- 4 for peace, love and understanding
- 4 for general morality
- 9 were too general to classify

Today, I want to focus on the idea of a Christian nation, especially the thought of going back and recovering something that we once had, which has been lost. Some of the comments pointing to that idea:

"I want a Christian nation again."

"A righteous nation led by righteous leaders."

"Get back to Bible principles and godly standards."

"That our country would once again be God-fearing, led by him."

"That our leaders recognize America as a Christian nation and get back to God."

"For our nation to return to God, have godly leaders..."

"That we be a godly nation who acknowledges Jesus as Savior, submits to his will."

I understand this idea, and I share the concern. At the same time, I've always been a little puzzled when people so confidently assert that we used to be a Christian nation. Our Constitution, after all, allows for slavery and identifies a slave as three-fifths of a person for census purposes, and by its silence, identifies a black man as no person at all for every other purpose. It took the first century of our history to deal with the slavery issue (much longer than that if you count the Colonial period). It took the second century to deal with the second issue, and we're still reaping the consequences of those years of decidedly non-Christian behavior. Just a month or so ago, I stumbled on an article from the very early 1900s in the NY Times about the little town where I where I went to Jr. High – Millersburg, Ohio – and how a black man had been lynched there for no good reason and with no consequence to those involved. Not very Christian. And I also think about the scandalous ways we dealt with the American Indians again and again during our first 150 years (again, much longer if you count the colonial period), including Kingston's claim to fame of being "Capitol for a Day" and I wonder where Christ was in that. Now remember, these happened during the times when we had prayer in schools and curriculum based on the Bible and high levels of church attendance, but remember God's standard for us: **But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; ¹⁶for it is written: "Be holy, because I am holy."**

Then too, I think about the fact that the rest of the world looks at us and sees that our most notable exports are Michael Jackson and Eminem and Kid Rock and Nike and Coke, and they say, "Wow, that's what a Christian nation is all about". President Obama made a lot of Christians mad by going around saying that we aren't a Christian nation anymore, but he may have inadvertently done Christ a favor by disassociating his name from all that.

Still, it IS true that America has been shaped in some profound ways by Christ and the Bible and the values in the Bible. So today I want to talk for awhile on the ways Christianity has shaped our nation, and there are many. But then, I want to look at some other streams besides Christianity that shaped us as well so that we have a more complete picture of how we got here. Finally, we'll talk about the key for national renewal.

Ways Christianity shaped our nation

The people we honor at Thanksgiving came here for freedom to practice their Christian faith. The "pilgrims" were Christians from England who could not in good conscience worship and serve with the official state church, the church of England. Because of this, they first moved to Amsterdam, then Holland, and when these proved unsatisfactory for practicing their faith in freedom, they came to America, to Massachusetts. William Bradford, who eventually became governor of the new Plymouth colony, wrote that they came here to get their children away from evil influences, to try for a better live, and because of the "great hope, for the propagating and advancing the gossell (sic) of the kingdom of Christ in those remote parts of the world."

A much larger migration of Puritans came to America from England beginning in 1630 to establish the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Among them was John Winthrop who I quoted on Memorial Day weekend when he said:

For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us. So that 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... We shall shame the faces of many of God's worthy servants, and cause their prayers to be turned into curses upon us til we be consumed out of the good land whither we are a-going.

In that spirit, the Puritans founded an intentional Christian community that spread across New England, one where church and government were very much united.

If you run through American history, you'll find Christian truth being elevated and praised by the most prominent leaders in American politics. Revolutionary leader Patrick Henry: "Righteousness alone can exalt America as a nation. Whoever thou art, remember this; and in thy sphere practice virtue thyself, and encourage it in others." John Jay, the first Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court: "The Bible is the best of all books, for it is the word of God and teaches us the way to be happy in this world and in the next. Continue therefore to read it and to regulate your life by its precepts." George Washington, in a speech to the Delaware Indian Chiefs, said something he couldn't say today: "You do well to wish to learn our arts and ways of life, and above all, the religion of Jesus Christ. These will make you a greater and happier people than you are." David Brewer, who served on the U. S. Supreme Court from 1889 till 1910 called America a Christian nation in an important Supreme Court decision (can you imagine our Supreme Court saying such a thing today?), and then wrote the following in 1905:

[I]n what sense can [America] be called a Christian nation? Not in the sense that Christianity is the established religion or that the people are in any manner compelled to support it. On the contrary, the Constitution specifically provides that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." Neither is it Christian in the sense that all its citizens are either in fact or name Christians. On the contrary, all religions have free scope within our borders. Numbers of our people profess other religions, and many reject all. Nor is it Christian in the sense that a profession of Christianity is a condition of holding office or otherwise engaging in public service, or essential to recognition either politically or socially. In fact, the government as a legal organization is independent of all religions. Nevertheless, we constantly speak of this republic as a Christian nation – in fact, as the leading Christian nation of the world.

He then went on to say that of all the nations of the world, ours has the greatest claim to be called a Christian nation because Christianity "has so largely shaped and molded it." (From [Wall Builders](#))

These quotes and many others can be found at WallBuilders.com, a web site by David Barton devoted to showing America's Christian heritage. Some of these quotes go well into the 20th century and can be found on the lips of unlikely leaders. But I want to leave this first section by agreeing with David Brewer when he says that America was "so largely shaped and molded by Christianity", and also with this quote from John Adams, our second President: *Our Constitution was made only for a religious and moral people. It is wholly inadequate for the government of any other.* * Letter to the Officers of the First Brigade of the Third Division of the Militia of Massachusetts (1798-10-11)

Other streams (besides Christianity) that shaped America

While there is this strong and even dominant Christian stream flowing through our history, it is by no means the only influence here. There's the commerce stream, for example. Before the size of North America was understood, many merchants and explorers were sure that they would eventually find a water passage through this country that would provide a short cut to India and China and all the merchandise there. While the Puritans came for religious freedom, many other settlers came seeking commerce and wealth, including the ones who established the FIRST successful colony here, in Jamestown, Virginia in 1607. BTW, if you do your research, you might

challenge me on the intentions of Jamestown because in their charter, written by the same King James who was soon to publish the KJV, it gives them the task of spreading Christianity to the natives in America. But if you look at the history and goals of those who came to Jamestown, their interests were primarily commercial. That isn't an evil thing, but it is quite different than the Pilgrims of 1620.

The influence of commerce is important in the history of America – so much so that I can see one person standing back and looking at history and saying that Christianity is the primary force that shaped this land, and another saying, “No, it was commerce, industry and business that drove us into our future.” Which is true? Both are, even though they have very different goals. The stream of commerce helps explain why we tolerated slavery for so long, and why we dealt so dishonestly with the Indians, and why we tolerated factory labor by young children, and why we still tolerate it as long as it stays overseas where we can't see it.

And then, just as important but not quite as easy to get a handle on, there is the stream of The Enlightenment that shaped our country, a way of thinking that you probably vaguely remember from history class that has more influence on you than you know. David Barton at WallBuilders.com says that it was **Biblical Christianity that gave us a representative government** rather than a king who thought he was divinely appointed; and it gave us **freedom of religion**, and the **separation of church and state**, and a **free-market approach to religion** resulting in **religious diversity**. But I disagree with him. I think these ideas came more from Enlightenment thinking than the Bible, though the Bible played a vital part in applying them for generations in America.

Two very basic principles of the Enlightenment:

Human reason, rather than God's revelation, is the best source of truth. Thomas Jefferson is a good example of this thinking. He was fascinated by religious topics and he believed in God and Divine Justice and loved the moral teachings of Jesus, but he didn't believe in hell, nor in miracles, nor in the divinity of Jesus, and he called Paul "first corrupter of the doctrines of Jesus". Jefferson wrote to his young nephew who was in school and said: *Fix Reason firmly in her seat, and call to her tribunal every fact, every opinion. Question with boldness even the existence of a God; because, if there be one, he must more approve the homage of reason than of blindfolded fear. ... Do not be frightened from this inquiry by any fear of its consequences. If it end in a belief that there is no God, you will find incitements to virtue in the comfort and pleasantness you feel in its exercise and in the love of others which it will procure for you.* -- (Jefferson's Works, Vol. ii., p. 217). Jefferson's biographer Merrill D. Peterson says that according to Jefferson, *"morality required no divine sanction or inspiration, no appeal beyond reason and nature, perhaps not even the hope of heaven or the fear of hell; and so the whole edifice of Christian revelation came tumbling to the ground."*

When Jefferson ran for President in 1800, many Christians feared the worst for our country. One New England paper wrote: "Should the infidel Jefferson be elected to the Presidency, the seal of death is that moment set on our holy religion, our churches will be prostrated, and some infamous prostitute, under the title of goddess of reason, will preside in the sanctuaries now devoted to the worship of the most High." Jefferson famously responded by saying: **"Whether or no there be a Supreme Being in charge of our several affairs is above my pay-grade"**. (Not really! He actually defended his faith, unorthodox as it was).

Now even Jefferson placed a high value on Christianity as a source of morality. He attended worship, encouraged public prayer and challenged people to turn to the teachings of Jesus for guidance. But he was truly a child of the Enlightenment in that he valued human reason above God's revelation in Scripture as the highest source of truth.

The other very basic principle of the Enlightenment:

Natural rights rather than **allegiance to God** form the basis of society. The beloved words of the Declaration of Independence (written by Jefferson) express this foundation of natural rights even though they pay homage to God as their source: ***“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.”***

Now I'm not saying that this is a bad way to start a government of fallen people by fallen people. But the issue here is **the idea of a Christian nation**. Do we know the God of the Bible well enough to realize how differently we relate to Him, and how different is His church? God doesn't say: "OK, let's start with your rights. You all have the right to be who you want and do what you want. Now what I'd LIKE you to do is consider these 10 Suggestions for a Happy Life". Instead, he says: "I am the Lord, your God. You shall have NO other gods before me!" The Declaration of Independence **pays homage** to God by saying early on that our Creator gave us some rights that we're ready to fight for, and it ends by saying that hopefully we will succeed with the help of Divine Providence, but it's mostly a document of our natural rights and a list of all of the ways the British king has disregarded our rights.

As for the Constitution, it is even more careful about giving us our natural rights. In a remarkably short document (which, by the way, doesn't mention God at all), it lays out what the three branches of government can do. And then because some people thought it ought to be a little more specific, there were immediately ten amendments added, a Bill of Rights, that say we have the right to religious freedom, the right to free speech, the right to a free press, the right to peacefully assemble, the right to bear arms, and to not have to house soldiers in peace time, and to be free from unreasonable search and seizure and to have a speedy trial by jury, and to be free from cruel and unusual punishment and then it has two amendments that say that if it isn't in the Constitution, the states and the people can make their own decisions.

And BTW, what's the purpose of the Constitution? It is stated at the beginning. It isn't to serve God or evangelize the heathen or develop holiness in the people but rather to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare and secure the blessings of liberty for ourselves and our posterity.

And I agree with all of that. I value our Constitution and I think it has been a great blessing to many millions of people, and it is a blessing to us right this moment as we peacefully assemble and exercise our freedom of religion and freedom of speech. But let me bring up those words again from John Adams: *Our Constitution was made only for a religious and moral people. It is wholly inadequate for the government of any other.* Actually, here's a fuller version:

“We have no government armed with power capable of contending with human passions unbridled by morality and religion. Avarice, ambition, revenge, or gallantry, would break the strongest cords of our Constitution as a whale goes through a net. Our Constitution was made only for a religious and moral people. It is wholly inadequate for the government of any other.

In the same breath, Adams affirms the need for religion and morality AND says that such things aren't part of the Constitution.

So what happens when the bridles of morality and religion come off? Adams didn't think the Constitution had the power to keep us together. Why not? Because the Constitution and the Bill of Rights attached to it are **based on our natural rights rather than allegiance to a Holy God** who calls his people to **“be holy for I am holy”**. Our nation and its leaders once agreed that

the principles of Christianity provided the morality necessary to restrain the all-out pursuit of our natural rights at the expense of everything else. As the church lost its holiness and Christians lost their distinctiveness, the salt has lost its saltiness and therefore its ability to contend with avarice, ambition, revenge and a host of other sins.

That leads us into talking about the key for national renewal. I haven't used a lot of Scripture in this sermon because I spent most of my time diagnosing the problem. But the solutions are in Scripture and they apply to the people of God first.

We've all heard **2 Chronicles 7:14** applied to America, but it is addressed to the people of God. It says: **"...if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land."** God said that to Israel at the time of the dedication of Solomon's temple. If we claim it as our own (and I think that's a legitimate way to understand the Scripture) we HAVE to apply it to the church, to Christians. WE have to admit that we have turned from God in many ways and have gone off to chase our own idols. How can we hope for Christian values in government and godliness among our leaders if we don't pursue the same in our churches and in our lives?

Next week, I hope to continue this series by looking at the church and how it lost its way (at least partly) by drinking from the streams of commerce and the Enlightenment and others as well. But to close, let us all consider this statement from **Ephesians 4:17-24** about the temptation that always awaits us to follow other gods, and the resounding call to live differently, to go wholeheartedly after the radical love and holiness of Jesus Christ:

¹⁷So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. ¹⁸They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. ¹⁹Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more.

²⁰You, however, did not come to know Christ that way. ²¹Surely you heard of him and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus. ²²You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; ²³to be made new in the attitude of your minds; ²⁴and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.