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A Christian Nation Requires Christian Christians Christian Nation, Christian Church, pt. 2 of 2 – 7.26.9

What's the most obvious requirement you can think of for a nation like ours to be called a Christian nation? Is it Bible-based laws? National days of prayer? Is it to have the manger scene on every courthouse lawn and a Gideon Bible in every hotel? Of course not. Even though we hear about these things and some of them are important, we know that the most obvious requirement for a nation to be a truly Christian nation is for it to be inhabited by honest to goodness Christians. And not just people who call themselves Christians, but real, authentic CHRISTIAN Christians.

That's why I've given my sermon the somewhat ridiculous title, "a Christian nation requires Christian Christians." Sometimes, it's the most obvious things we need to hear again.

Review:

Last week, I showed you the results of your prayer cards, filled out on July 4th weekend, which asked for your greatest prayer concerns for America. Out of 127 prayer requests, 41 were for our nation to be come (or return to being) a Christian nation; 31 for social and political concerns including abortion; 24 for the church and its repentance, return to holiness; and 15 were prayers for guidance for our leaders, for Christians.

We then spent a little time tracing the Christian influence in our country, quoting some of our early political leaders, including 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."*

Then we talked about some other streams besides Christianity that have shaped our nation, including the stream of commerce – not all of our early settlers came here seeking religious freedom; a great many came seeking fortune. The commerce stream helps explain why we tolerated slavery so long, and why we broke so many treaties with the American Indians. Slavery was good for the economy (if you didn't happen to BE a slave) and the Indians had all the good land we needed to grow our economy. So we engaged in decidedly non-Christian behavior because we let the commerce stream speak more loudly in some areas than the Christian stream.

Then also, we discussed the stream of The Enlightenment, which elevated human reason over divine revelation as the best source of truth, and natural rights over allegiance to God as the best way to order our society. Our Constitution may well be among the best human documents ever written (right up there with the script for Rocky 3) but it doesn't mention God at all, and our Founders knew that religion and morality among the people were necessary to sustain a government by the Constitution. John Adams, our second President, said: *Our Constitution was made only for a religious and moral people. It is wholly inadequate for the government of any other.*

And then we said that the key to national renewal lies with the church, with Christians who must put away other idols and return to God and his call for us to be holy as he is holy. We think we're doing pretty good as a people if we have prayer before NASCAR races and the Ten Commandments posted at school, but God's Word says 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."

Other Streams in the Church:

Today I want to move forward and talk about how Christians and churches have failed, at least in part, to keep up our part of making or keeping America a godly nation. If "our Constitution was made for a religious and moral people" and yet Christians are irreligious and immoral, then no President can hold back the tide of godlessness just because he or she goes to the right church.

Let's start with the stream of commerce, which we could call the stream of business, economic growth, and personal materialism. There is no doubt that this country is and always has been driven in large part by the desire to grow, build wealth and prosper. If I were to trace the history of that, we'd talk about the cotton gin, the railroads, the telegraph, the rise of factories, the post-war boom of the 50s, and the rise of silicon valley. We'd talk about advertising, which has become ever more constant and ever more personal, and how the number of things we absolutely need has grown a hundredfold since I was born, and how the number of square feet you need in a decent home has tripled.

But instead of tracing that (any more than I just did), let me just point out that we have bought in to that stream as American Christians, and it often doesn't square with the teachings of Christ. Consider **1 Timothy 6:6-10** - **⁶But godliness with contentment is great gain. ⁷For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. ⁸But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. ⁹People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. ¹⁰For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.**

Now Scripture doesn't say that making money or buying a few things is sinful. A few verses later, Paul says to command rich Christians, not to sell everything and become poor, but to depend on God, to become generous and willing to share. But the stream of commerce is always a potential idol, tempting us to bow down and worship.

Then there's the stream of The Enlightenment, with its **two basic principles**: 1) Human reason over Divine revelation as the best source of truth, and 2) Natural rights rather than allegiance to God as the best way to order society.

When I think of the conservative churches in America, it seems to be that Reason over Revelation has NOT been our biggest problem. In fact, we could use more reason UNDER revelation...or, we could stand to think more, and think better than we do. When it comes to politics or social issues or money or family matters, it can be discouraging just how unthinking, unreasonable we can be. God gave us minds to train and to use for THINKING, and it is a shame when we let them rust away.

Other parts of the church (rather than ours) have indeed elevated human reason to divine status, which is to say they have succumbed to the first temptation – "Your eyes shall be opened and you shall be like God" – and have in effect promoted themselves over God. It was a shocking day when I realized that there were practicing church leaders and church-goers who didn't believe in hell, in Judgment Day, in Christ's second coming, nor even in his resurrection or that there was anything special about his death. And why do they reject these things? Because these beliefs are unreasonable. People don't rise from the dead, and therefore (they say), these stories are primitive myths.

These denominations have in fact embraced something close to the Deism of Thomas Jefferson, saying that God created the universe, wound it up like a watch, and then walked away. I certainly wouldn't go to church if I thought that this was the whole truth about faith, and in fact, such denominations have lost a lot of members in the last four decades. But that isn't who we are, so I'm not going to spend much time on it.

But the other basic teaching of the Enlightenment – natural rights over allegiance to God – that's a stream from we have drunk deeply. Now everyone is tempted to remake God in his/her own image, and because we have been raised in a country where people are very concerned about their rights, maybe we have recreated God as someone who cares more about giving us our rights than he does about making us holy. For instance:

The right to happiness. Don't I have the right to be happy? Or at least to make happiness my all-consuming pursuit? If the person I'm married to is making me unhappy, or if I think a bigger house or a faster car will increase my joy, don't I have the right to make a change? If I don't look out for me, who will?

That's the doctrine of happiness. Contrast it now with the way of Christ laid out in **2 Corinthians 5:16-18** - **¹⁶Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. ¹⁷For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. ¹⁸So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.**

We say: "I have a right to be happy, or at least to pursue happiness. The Bible says that real joy is the result of being faithful to God even in trouble.

What about the right to liberty, the right to have my rights? Surely God wants me to free and not a slave to any government nor even anyone else's opinion about how I should live my life.

1 Corinthians 9 is so interesting because Paul begins by talking about rights that he has, and then moves on to how he lays these rights down for the sake of others. He winds up by saying: **¹⁹Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible... I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. ²³I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.**

Then there's the right to life, which has come to refer primarily to the issue of abortion. It's even a little dangerous to frame the abortion debate in terms of a Right to Life as we have done for the past 25 years. Surely a child within its mother's womb has the right to life! I agree with that, but the trouble with focusing on the child's rights is that those rights can be put into competition with a mother's rights, and the two conflict. People say: "Doesn't a self-aware woman, whether she's 17 or 34 years old, with commitments and dreams and plans, have the right to end a pregnancy she cannot handle? Doesn't she have a greater right than a fetus, especially one in the very early stages whose brain is not yet developed enough for self-awareness or conscious thought?"

No matter where you stand on that argument, notice that the foundation is natural rights – whose are most important? Now Thomas Jefferson thought that people didn't need God to reason their way to morality, but I don't think he knew how far we could push our rights without a reverence for a holy God.

The Declaration of Independence wasn't thinking about an unborn baby when it said we have a right to life, it was thinking of me and you. And we DO have that right, but once again, Christ calls us to think about that right and deal with it in a way that is way out of step with natural thinking: **²⁴Then Jesus said to his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. ²⁵For whoever wants to save his life will lose it,**

but whoever loses his life for me will find it. ²⁶What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Matthew 16:24-26

There's also the rights to free speech and a free press. Now we all know there are limits on free speech. No one has the right to shout "Fire!" in a crowded theater, nor to shout "Movie!" in a crowded fire hall. But for generations, there was general agreement about what constituted decency and indecency, and people agreed that communities could make laws about what they considered indecent. But when rights are elevated as the most important thing, even by Christians, then even Christians can sit around and say, "Well we really can't stop pornographers and we really can't say much about the awful things people say in songs because we all have the right to free speech, and we don't want them telling us what to say and do.

At this point in our nation's history, I really don't know what to do about free speech as a member of this community. Back when more people understood the language of holiness, it was possible to get a consensus against things like pornography. It's harder now, and I think it's because there are fewer Christian Christians (as my title says) or fewer of us concerned with holiness and bothered by sin. That's why my message today is that holiness begins at home, with the people of God.

On the other hand, we Christians can't help noticing that OUR rights seem to be somewhere near the bottom of the cultural debate. Our country seems to be moving in the direction of saying that you can't censor pornography but you can be arrested for saying that homosexual behavior is sinful or that gay marriage goes against God's created order. But as I have said before, the answer (insofar as there is an answer) is to lift up Jesus and behave like Jesus even as we continue to tell the truth that people don't want to hear. If the main thing people know us for is being "anti-gay", we're not lifting up Christ and we're not effectively living like Him. Jesus was anti-sin, but that isn't the main and only thing people knew about him!

Now it may well be that our Constitution is the best human constitution ever written. It may be that our government in it's original form is the best government possible of fallen people by fallen people for fallen people. But even if it is, our Constitution has always depended on the character of its people in order to work. John Adams, our second President, who said that *our Constitution was made only for a religious and moral people* also wrote the following:

"Statesmen...may plan and speculate for Liberty, but it is Religion and Morality alone, which can establish the Principles upon which Freedom can securely stand. The only foundation of a free Constitution is pure Virtue, and if this cannot be inspired into our People in a greater Measure than they have it now, they may change their Rulers and the forms of Government, but they will not obtain a lasting Liberty. They will only exchange Tyrants and Tyrannies."

John Adams in a letter to Zabdiel Adams (1776-06-21)

To put it in Christian language, our Constitution works when Christians and churches put more stock in their allegiance to a holy God than they do in their own rights.

This is important to remember because, as we Christians have seen our nation slide off the moral abyss into sin, many of us have responded by trying to use the government itself to turn back the clock, to pass new laws that spell morality out for everyone. And good laws have their place, but laws cannot make immoral people into moral people.

At their best, laws reflect the morality of the majority of the people and are used to bring the stragglers into line. During the period of the Civil War, we passed laws saying that you couldn't

make someone your slave, but these came about largely as the result of dedicated Christians who, out of allegiance to a Holy God who revealed Himself in Jesus Christ, stoked the conscience of a nation and said that slavery was a compromise we had made with the Devil and with his false god of commerce. Many of these people were willing to risk their lives based on their loyalty to God. The same is true of the Civil Rights laws of the 1960s. But consider the Defense of Marriage Act of 1996, which defined marriage as between a man and a woman and recognized the right of states to not recognize gay marriages performed in other states. It was strongly supported by the Republican Congress and signed into law by President Clinton, but it is still under attack, and the current administration has vowed to repeal it. Perhaps that law held back the tide for awhile, but without a culture made up of Christians dedicated to holiness and Christ like love the law itself cannot change people.

This is exactly what God proved with another type of law, the Law of the Old Covenant. Paul said this very thing in **Romans 7**, and then he concluded in **Romans 8:3 - For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering.** Even God's law required a purifying sacrifice to cleanse his people and make them holy.

No Guarantees

Last week, I said that our return to holiness is the key for national renewal. Let me now add that there is no guarantee with this. At this point, our return to holiness may result in making us outsiders, even inviting persecution. That's OK. Being persecuted for righteousness is far better than being ignored in our sinfulness. What my college professor said 25 years ago is more true today: "Perhaps the world doesn't bother to persecute us because we are so much like the world" (Bob Martin, Johnson Bible College).

Which brings us back to this. A Christian nation requires Christian Christians. Our founders knew that. And we know it too. Behind at least some of our moral outrage has been our desire to have the government stand up for values we no longer uphold ourselves. So let's remember the holiness we have forsaken and return to our first love, our Lord who said to us:

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."