

In God We Trust ?

Lori Lower, Oct. 10, 2021

I Chronicles 29:10-18

John 18:36

Luke 17:20-21

Ephesians 6:12

This is probably not the recommended way to begin a sermon...

Let me start by saying that I am NOT apologizing if it feels like I am stepping on some toes with this message. Because I have stepped all over my own – with some very heavy-duty, steel-toed work boots! I'll admit that some of what I'm going to say may be hard to hear or accept, and I certainly want you to carefully think (and pray) about how this may apply to you. Some come to church expecting to hear a message that makes them feel comfortable – something inspiring – that makes them feel good. On the other hand, I believe that there is merit in being made to feel “uncomfortable” – when a message is spoken to challenge and perhaps bring about a change in one's perspective and life as a Christ-follower.

God has laid it on my heart to share something that I have been wrestling with in my own life for some time, but more so over the past year. This culminated in a course that I had the opportunity to take this past May, a Brethren in Christ core course, Theology of the Church. This course helped me to regain a proper perspective of where I should be putting my trust. One of the required textbooks was by Greg Boyd - *The Myth of a Christian Nation: How the Quest for Political Power is Destroying the Church*. You'd be surprised when I tell you the copyright – 2005. Another book that found its way onto my bookshelf that I'm currently still working through is Pastor Eugene Cho's book, *Thou Shalt Not Be a Jerk: A Christian's Guide to Engaging Politics* which came out in March 2020. Unfortunately, I received Cho's book *after* the November 2020 election. I wish I had read these books last year before the election because I found myself caught up in the political division in the nation, which had worked its way into the Church. I had begun to think that America was doomed – for lack of a better word.

Now you can relax, I'm not going to be preaching about religion and politics per se, but I will be focusing upon an important underlying issue that is related to those topics.

I've titled this message “In God We Trust ?” Question mark. Sometimes I think it's hard to tell – do we trust in God or do we trust in our nation, our government, our politics, ourselves? The bigger question is who do we believe will “save” or “deliver” us – God or government or even the Church (capital C) in America?

I have been hearing a lot of things lately that make me cringe. Things like:

We need to win America back for Christ

God has blessed America because it is (or was) a Christian nation

How can you call yourself a Christian if you voted for _____ (fill in the blank)

America is the greatest country in the world because we have religious freedom (I wonder how believers around the world feel when they hear this?)

I have also been troubled that people tend to identify America as the “new Israel” when clearly neither the Scriptures nor God makes that allusion. Boyd discusses this extremely well in his book in a chapter titled – One Nation under God?. He says that “the proclamation that we are ‘one nation under God’ arguably serves a useful social function, for it gives many Americans a sense of shared values and vision. ... We must always remember that, while some nations serve law and order better than others, the powers that govern *all* nations are to a significant extent corrupted by the polluting influence of Satan.” (p. 147) I’m sure we’ve all heard the saying, “Absolute power corrupts absolutely.”

A few years ago, I had read an article which was printed in the Fall 2018 issue of *Shalom! A Journal for the Practice of Reconciliation*, published by the BIC. It was based upon a November 2017 sermon from David Flowers, senior pastor of the Grantham Church. It’s titled: Being a Third Way Church. While he takes the discussion in a slightly different direction than where I’m heading today, he very succinctly states what has been bothering me for quite some time.

“There is nothing more divisive in this country and in the church today than politics. If we let partisan politics cloud our vision, if we let allegiance to a flag and American political parties take precedence over our baptism and our unity in Christ, we are no different than those without Christ and we have absolutely nothing uniquely Kingdom to offer the world. Our ancient confession that “Jesus is Lord” must mean that Caesar (whether Republican or Democrat) is **not** Lord.” Later in the article, he goes on to say that “We often can’t see that we’ve become idol worshippers, identifying with our earthly citizenship, a political party, and a particular viewpoint so much that anyone who disagrees with us must be an enemy of all that is good.”

Or to put it more bluntly (and I debated whether to share this Facebook meme): There is a BIG difference between following Jesus of Nazareth and the political/nationalistic movement that is often called Christianity. It’s time to learn the difference.

While there is nothing wrong with having an appropriate level of patriotism and pride in one’s country, I would like to remind us – those of us who call ourselves Christ-followers and those who are looking to us for answers – is where we should be putting our trust and hope. Yes, we should be praying for our leaders and for the people who inhabit our country, and for our nation as a whole. But I would suggest that maybe the reason – the underlying motive for our prayers – is that we can retain a certain level of “comfort,” that we *won’t* be called upon to suffer for Jesus. That then begs the question – in who, or what, or where are we placing our trust, faith, and hope?

I want to remind us of the contrast between the “kingdom of God” and the “kingdom of the world.”

I think most of us are aware of these two kingdoms that Jesus describes, in the Sermon on the Mount, which is found in Matthew chapters 5-7. Sometimes we refer to God’s kingdom as the upside down kingdom; where things or people who are to be considered the lowest are elevated to a higher position. Some call this the “power under” kingdom versus the “power over” kingdom, which is

typically thought to be under the rule and reign of Satan. Greg Boyd allots a good amount of space in his book, *The Myth of a Christian Nation*, analyzing these kingdoms. He states that it is hard to “resolve the ambiguity” of God controlling the order of the world, but “simply recognizing that there is, at the very least, a strong demonic presence polluting all versions of the kingdom of the world, has to significantly affect how followers of Jesus view earthly governments.” (p. 22)

In Luke 17:20-21, Jesus is responding to some questioning by the Pharisees. “When will the Kingdom of God come?” Jesus replied, “The Kingdom of God can’t be detected by visible signs. You won’t be able to say, ‘Here it is!’ or ‘It’s over there!’ for the Kingdom of God is already among you.” (NLT)

John 18 is the account where Jesus is betrayed and arrested. When he is eventually brought before Pilate, Pilate asks in the second part of verse 35, “Are you the king of the Jews?” After a bit of back and forth, Jesus answers, in verse 36: “My Kingdom is not an earthly kingdom. If it were, my followers would fight to keep me from being handed over to the Jewish leaders. But my Kingdom is not of this world.” (NLT)

The Apostle Paul, in Ephesians 6:12, states “For we are not fighting against flesh-and-blood enemies, but against evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against mighty powers in this dark world, and against evil spirits in the heavenly realms.” (NLT)

Referring back to the Luke 17 passage, I found an interesting footnote in my Bible which said “The Kingdom of God is not like an earthly kingdom with geographical boundaries. Instead, it begins with the work of God’s Spirit in people’s lives and in relationships. We must resist looking to institutions or programs for evidence of the progress of God’s Kingdom. Instead, we should look for what God is doing in people’s hearts.”

In *The Myth of a Christian Nation*, after Boyd’s statements about the paradigm of Israel juxtaposed with America, he goes on to say, “We are to live in such a way that we manifest the radical difference between the kingdom of God and every version of the kingdom of the world. Our job, in other words, is to manifest the *holiness* of the kingdom of God, and *that* is how we are to be a light of hope to the world.” (p. 148)

While there isn’t enough time this morning to unpack much of what Boyd writes, I would like to read his basic assessment from his introduction to the book.

“The myth of America as a Christian nation, with the church as its guardian, has been, and continues to be, damaging both to the church and the advancement of God’s kingdom. Among other things, this nationalistic myth blinds us to the way in which our most basic and most cherished cultural assumptions are diametrically opposed to the kingdom way of life taught by Jesus and his disciples. Instead of living out the radically countercultural mandate of the kingdom of God, this myth has inclined us to Christianize many pagan aspects of our culture. Instead of providing the culture with a radically alternative way of life, we largely present it with a religious version of what it already is. The myth clouds our vision of God’s distinctly beautiful kingdom and thereby undermines our motivation to live as set-apart (holy) disciples of this kingdom.”

I would add that when we perceive that America as we know it is falling apart, that myth clouds our trust in God.

You may have noticed that while I've been referencing *The Myth of a Christian Nation*, I haven't yet brought up the actual argument for or against America being a Christian nation. While that is not the purpose of this message, very simply put, the definition would be that *Christian* means "Christ-like," and in the author's opinion, "there never was a time when America as a nation has acted Christlike." Boyd addresses this throughout his book and I would suggest it as recommended reading, if you're interested in how he lays out this position. (I'll even loan you my copy.)

In an article I read this week, about how to pray specifically for the United States, a sports analogy was used to describe the obvious shift in the American culture. This comes from Dr. Dave Butts, chairman of America's National Prayer Committee.

"For many years now, the Church has been the home team in America. We've had the advantages that a home team enjoys. We were the culturally dominant force that had to be dealt with by everyone else. When national leaders talked about faith, everyone knew they were referring to the Christian faith. People believed in the freedom of religion. No one even considered such a thing as freedom *from* religion. But those days are over.

It's time to admit that the Church is no longer the home team in America. If we understand this, we will pray differently and more effectively for our nation. So much of the conflict comes when we still act as though we are on our home court.

It's hard. We feel as though we lost something special with a home court advantage. And in some ways, we have.

But it wasn't necessarily good and healthy for us to be the home team. That advantaged position often resulted in a watered-down, cultural faith that only vaguely resembled New Testament Christianity.

Rather than longing for a comfortable memory, we need to embrace our role as the away team. ...Rather than focus our prayers on returning the Church to a place of privilege, we need to be passionate about seeing the gospel preached with transforming power. Clarity of vision allows us to pray in alignment with the purposes of God."

But before we get discouraged – here's the pep talk!

We need to develop an away team mentality. "It is time for the Church in America to develop good missionary strategies for reaching our own nation." (Did you know that other countries are beginning to send missionaries here?) We can no longer assume that most people understand our "Christian" language and terms. It is a serious error to believe that those living in our cities and towns even know who Jesus is. It is not enough to elect some Christian politicians; we must re-evangelize America!"

As I begin to wrap this up, I want to read cite one more article.

In the publisher's note for this month's issue of Prayer Connect, although he was commenting on why we in America are surprised at miracles, made two very important points:

"Christians have experienced the safety of being the dominant culture in America. As this disappears more and more, we will need to rely on our faith, not on the power of our vote or voice." I will insert here that in Cho's book, he believes in the power of our vote and voice. Continuing with the quote, "When every human idea or thing that we have trusted is removed, many believers will begin to walk in the strength of Christ alone. Then, we when we pray, 'greater things' will happen." He also states, "I believe that before the end comes there will be the greatest spiritual awakening and revival the world has ever known. Why? Because God is bringing into His Kingdom those who are yet to be saved before Jesus comes."

Church – we need to be aware of the realities that exist. But we also do not need to live in fear of what appears to be happening in America – or anywhere else in the world. We need to put our trust and faith in the Kingdom of God.

There are many passages in the Bible that encourage us to "keep the faith." Here are two examples:

Psalm 121:1-2

I lift up my eyes to the mountains (or hills) -- where does my help come from? My help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth. (NIV)

This is Philippians in The Passion Translation:

⁶ Don't be pulled in different directions or worried about a thing. Be saturated in prayer throughout each day, offering your faith-filled requests before God with overflowing gratitude. Tell him every detail of your life, ⁷ then God's wonderful peace that transcends human understanding, will guard your heart and mind through Jesus Christ.

I don't think it's any coincidence that the messages given here at ABC over the last few months have focused on what I believe we will need to draw upon in the future: Jeffrey's sermon on "Rooted in Christ," Pastor Keith's series on "Living the Gospel," Nathan Wells on "Being Gospeling People," Carolyn Peacock's "Persevering Faith," and last week's, Jason Oberholser "Are You a First-Responder?" Let me just throw in here a Public Service Announcement – audio recordings of all sermons are archived on the ABC website. So if you miss a Sunday or want to go back and listen to a sermon again, just go to the Sermons tab at the top of the home page. End of the PSA. I'm excited that Pastor Keith's next sermon series, which starts next week, will be "Learning from the Persecuted Church." While I don't consider myself to be a prophet or a pessimist, I do tend to think that I'm a realist. We need to pay attention to what's happening around us.

Two weeks ago, when I was having some unusually high anxiety, a close friend admonished me to get off the internet and Facebook, and just breathe in God. Which was unusual because I'm usually the one

who's encouraging others to do just that. I knew I needed to fill my mind with other thoughts. I knew that what I was dwelling on was causing me to lose sight of where my trust should be. Then the song "In Times Like These" came to my mind and it was in my head for a solid couple of days before I realized my anxiety was gone.

In times like these you need a Savior,
In times like these you need an anchor:
Be very sure, be very sure,
Your anchor holds and grips the Solid Rock!

This rock is Jesus, Yes He's the One,
This rock is Jesus, the only One;
Be very sure, be very sure,
Your anchor holds and grips the Solid Rock!

I intentionally chose the Old Testament reading in I Chronicles because David's prayer of praise restores the order of my thoughts towards who's ultimately in control.

I want to read a part of that again:

"Yours, O Lord, is the greatness, the power, the glory, the victory, and the majesty. Everything in the heavens and on earth is yours, O Lord, and this is your kingdom. We adore you as the one who is over all things. Wealth and honor come from you alone, for you rule over everything. Power and might are in your hand, and at your discretion people are made great and given strength."

If ever we needed a reminder that God is still in charge, it's now. Whenever we look at the things that are going on around us, things that cause us to worry, to have anxiety, to be disheartened, dismayed or depressed, or maybe even angry, we need to keep our eyes and our hearts fixed on God. Fixed on Jesus.

As Christ-followers we are called to "live out our faith," but we need to be rock-solid of what we are living out – on what our trust is built upon.

It's time for each of us to take a close look at where we are actually putting our trust. We may need to repent, as I had to, and refocus on God, so we can truly say "In God We Trust."

Benediction: Romans 15:13

I pray that God, the source of hope, will fill you completely with joy and peace because you trust in him. Then you will overflow with confident hope through the power of the Holy Spirit.