

## If America Became a Christian Nation

During this month of July, we are looking into the question of our nation's religious identity. We are asking what our American spiritual consciousness is all about. Discerning all that takes some effort. Our religious origins are complex. Next Sunday we will explore some of those origins.

This morning I am suggesting something about the language we presently use to describe ourselves. Our religious identity. Our spiritual consciousness.

The language most commonly heard says we are a Christian nation. I do not think that is correct. We are not a Christian nation. Never have been. And I doubt ever will be.

Yet many Americans promote ourselves in that language. But simply saying so does not make it true. We have leanings in that direction. We have lots of signs proclaiming that affiliation. But I sense underneath all the rhetoric is an inability to grasp what that would really mean. "For if America became a Christian nation," Benjamin Corey wrote in Time Magazine a few weeks ago, "it probably would not like what it found."

We recognize that many of our ancestors came to these shores seeking religious freedom. Many of them viewed their religious world through the lens of traditional Christianity. Their Christianity was rigid. It was brutally legalistic. It focused on a harsh view of a punishing God. It was a religion that was personally and morally restrictive.

In the early years of the colonies its aim was to penalize the individual for the most insignificant and minor offense. If life for the 16<sup>th</sup> century Puritans was tough in England, it continued to maintain those strident views of Christianity in the New World. The only difference was that in America in the 1600s you devised your own punitive religion. You didn't need the Church of England or State Church in Holland to do it for you. That's one of the realities behind our religious identity – the freedom to persecute others in new ways. Indigenous peoples found that to be true.

And as true as that may historically here's my problem with that narrative.

It is a far cry from the spiritual consciousness of the first century followers of Jesus. I think they and Jesus would be hard-pressed to find similarities between the religion the Pilgrims practiced or even the 21<sup>st</sup> century version of it here and now and the one the early Jesus movement embraced.

Let me give you a few examples of what this country would look like if American became a Christian nation. Here's my short list of what would have to happen. Perhaps you have your own list.

**First** we would have to replace the U.S. Department of Defense with the U.S. Department of Peace. Ceasing the killing of one's enemies would be our first priority. Taking someone else's life is, very simply put, not a part of the message of Jesus.

The love for one's enemy would have to replace the current bashing and eradicating of that enemy. Jesus taught that his disciples were to bless them, not to blast them. The work of peace was Jesus' ongoing ministry. Disbanding our military would be the first order of business as a Christian nation.

Converting the Pentagon from war to peace would mean that we would start using those trillions of dollars each year to bless the people of the world. We'd begin with the peoples we don't like. Pick a people. The list is not short. Bless the militant Arabs. Bless the Jihadist Muslims. No more drones in Palestine, Afghanistan, or Pakistan. Creating a federal agency called the Department of Peace or the Central Intelligence Agency for Enemy Love would give those government contractors loads of work as a starting point.

I think of the story during the last week of Jesus life. He arrives in Jerusalem and is soon arrested for being a trouble maker. As he is hauled off to court for trial, his friend Simon Peter yanks out his knife and slices through the ear of one of the soldiers. Jesus rebukes Peter for doing that. Haven't you learned anything from me, Peter? "Put that thing away" he says as he touches the wounded ear and brings healing back to the owner of that missing ear. "Whoever lives by the sword dies by the sword." A Christian nation would put away the sword. And leave it there. It would follow the prophet Isaiah's instructions in chapter two:

"Turn those swords into shovels. Take your spears and turn them into pruning hooks. There will be no playing war anymore."

It's odd how a Christian nation could misread that simple command.

---

**There's a Second** thing we'd do if we were a Christian nation. We'd have to end the Death Penalty. That has no place in Jesus' worldview

I think of that specific incident in Jesus' ministry where a woman is caught in the act of adultery and brought to him by the Pharisees for his take on the law code of Moses. "The law says she must be stoned to death. What do you say?"

I have often wondered if maybe Jesus muttered under his breath, "I'd like to know what you did with the man? Doesn't adultery require two people? Why did you not bring him along too?"

But Jesus is recorded as saying, "Let the person without any fault throw the first stone." They all had to leave presumably very sad because there is no one left to throw anything. Jesus stops that execution. And since no one is qualified technically to be the executioner, capital punishment would not exist in a Christian nation.

I realize that would be hard for folks who strongly support the Death Penalty, especially the folks in Texas. Ever since the Supreme Court lifted its ban on capital punishment in 1976, Texas began executing people at a quickened pace. Between 1976 and 2015 Texas executed 526 people.

All totaled, the USA executed 1411 persons. More than 3,000 men and women sit on death Row. 82% of those executed, Amnesty International reports, comes interestingly enough from the South. I find that curious and not a lit bit troubling. I have tried to understand how that could be.

In their book, The Rope, the Chair, and the Needle, three authors sorted through this phenomenon and suggested that one needs to understand the Southern culture where these executions have taken place. Part of the Southern context they found is a culture where excluding others from the rest of society is part of Dixie thinking.

You and I have seen that these past few weeks with the challenges to take down the Confederate flag. It may be gone from the State Capitol in South Carolina but I assure you it's still a proud bumper sticker for members of the KKK. "I've sold over 2,000 Confederate flags and (memorabilia) in the last three days," a store owner named Wild Man Myers from Kennesaw, Georgia said earlier this week. "It's hard to keep 'em in stock."

It's that culture which I think helps explain how prevalent executing other Americans has become. Studies suggest it's because in the Deep South is where we still dehumanize certain groups of people. Still proudly promote the taking of another person's life. Especially if that person is from another race or ethnic background. Different than the rest.

I suppose I could accept that reality if it were not for the cognitive dissonance in all this.

Look at a map of the United States where Capital Punishment is most visible. Compare that with a map of those states considered to be the Bible Belt and you find it's hard to distinguish one from the other. There's an eerie overlay of those two spectrums.

If America were a Christian nation, we'd have to stop killing people for the crime of killing people. That's a statement that sounds so nonsensical I don't even know what I just said.

But there is no mistaking Jesus' words on this subject. Jesus is very clear on that.

---

**Third.** If America became a Christian nation, we would seriously address, if not solve, the age-old problem of poverty. In the colorful words of Jesus in Matthew 25, Jesus describes an imaginary scene where the Day of Judgment has arrived. All nations are gathered before him.

He gives them a pop quiz. The quiz is on how they responded to the care of the poor, the needy, and the hungry. Those who did not score high on that question got a bad grade on that quiz. They were sent to study hall in a very hot place nobody wants to go to. And that study hall never comes to an end.

A Christian nation would understand that feeding the hungry and providing fare wages is the only answer Jesus is looking for. You miss that answer and sorry, but there is no makeup exam. Ever.

**Fourth.** Fourth thing we'd do if America were a Christian nation: we would truly care for the sick and those with disabilities. When you read the core teachings of Jesus you see his work was to bring healing to the people. That work was not optional.

Healthcare for any sick person in this country - any man, woman or child that has a medical condition, great or small - treatment for that condition would not be an option. It would be a given.

There's a wonderful story in John's gospel, chapter 5. It describes a man whose disability has left him a shell of his former life. Jesus sees him and Jesus heals him free of charge. The man has no insurance. He does not qualify for Medicare. Medicaid has not yet kicked in. The man has been paralyzed for a long time. The text says his paralysis is the result of his own stupid choices made 38 years earlier.

Jesus is not interested in his lapse of judgment. Jesus ignores the mistakes he has made. He simply brings healing and wholeness to the man who cannot believe his eyes. End of story.

Any truly Christian nation would make national healthcare a priority for all its people.

**Fifth.** If America were a Christian nation, we'd become more loving toward immigrants. The story we looked at in some detail a few weeks ago – the story of the Good Samaritan – is a story where an immigrant becomes the hero of the day. He sees a wounded Jewish traveler on the side of the road, down towards Jericho.

The whole point of the parable is that an undocumented alien stops and renders first aid when two other naturalized citizens pass by, doing nothing. The immigrant from across the border in Samaria spends his time and money doing what needs to be done. And Jesus commends him for that. His ethnicity and origin of passport is never questioned.

Other stories of ethnic minorities and foreigners becoming heroes are important parts of the stories Jesus shares. When you listen to these ancient narratives they each lift up non-Jews as examples of cultural barriers being shattered and removed by Jesus.

It's as if Jesus has found himself head of the INS for a day. He begins by reshaping this department and opens the borders all around his own country. He then spends the rest of the day handing out awards to foreigners for their acts of courage and compassion. These award ceremonies are found in Luke 4:26.

He first gives an award to an elderly woman who lives across the northern border in Phoenicia. Jesus thanks her for the work she has done to share cups of cold water with passing strangers.

The second award goes to a foreign king from Syria. His name is Naaman. Naaman suffers from a chronic disease known today as Hansen's disease. It's a wretched skin disorder. This foreign king ignores regional protocols prohibiting the crossing of international borders and the use of restricted waterways by unauthorized personnel. He is willing to share and share alike. Jesus commends Naaman for his courage and for his not speaking ill of another country's customs or

religious practices. Naaman respects that to which he does not belong and is grateful for any kindness shown to him along the way. The waters of the Jordan River is all he needs.

Jesus breaks down immigration barriers. He respects the gifts that come from folks, even if they have no green cards and don't speak his language. Leviticus 19 says:

When immigrants sojourn with you in your land, you shall not do them wrong. You shall treat the immigrant who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love them as yourselves, for you were immigrants in the land of Egypt. (Leviticus 19:33-34)

Leviticus seldom offers us words worth repeating on Sunday morning but this quote is one I really like.

A Christian nation, one that follows Jesus' lead, would be seen as one of the most pro-immigrant nations on earth.

---

### **And then there is this. Sixth.**

If America became a Christian nation, we'd do away with the Pledge of Allegiance. Boys and girls across this country stand each morning and begin their instruction by placing their hand over their heart. They make a vow to give allegiance to a flag with stars. That's not a bad thing. It is a good thing. Please make sure you hear me correctly here. It can be a good thing. But it is not Christian.

In a Christian nation you and I would recognize that it is not humanly possible to serve two masters. Jesus made that quite clear.

Other Christians in their lands have made that point quite clear. Dietrich Bonhoeffer understood that fact at the deepest levels of life. There is no such thing as two masters.

A Christian nation would not pledge allegiance to anyone or anything but Jesus himself. No exceptions. We'd have to find other ways to express our patriotism.

We would acknowledge Caesar's picture on the front side of the coins in our pocket. We would pay tribute to the country whose name is on that currency.

We would agree with Jesus that there are just some things we have to do, even if we don't like them. Pay your taxes. Then move on. Darn. I wish had hadn't said THAT.

As wacky as some of these ideas sound, they are all things Jesus said or did. Things he believed in.

Any nation using his name would by definition have to live out his teachings and follow his principles. What a radical country that would be - in the best sense of that word.

A place where these ideas expressed this morning are lived out and valued and practiced every single day.