

10. JESUS NEVER SOUGHT POLITICAL POWER

Religion and patriotism form an unholy union that goes back to the dawn of history. Not only have countless armies marched with the blessing of religious leaders, but many wars have been fought at the insistence of holy men who said it was the will of the god or gods they served. So strong is the tendency for people to wed their politics with their religion that when one nation attacks another it's almost automatically understood as the assault of a godless and evil foe against the forces of a holy and innocent folk. The resulting conflict becomes not just a war, but a holy war.

One might think that this scenario only plays out when countries of extreme religious diversity square off, say a Christian land against a Muslim land. Current events in the Middle East where Christian, Islamic, and Jewish armies face one another demonstrate just such a case. The religious rhetoric on all three sides would lead an objective observer to think that the armies of three different gods were fighting for supremacy.

Holy wars, however, don't always require that the opposing sides be of different religions. The Muslim nations of Iraq and Iran devastated one another's populations in the 1980's as religious leaders on both sides declared their cause to be the just one. Predominantly Christian nations have done the same. One need only note the numerous bloody conflicts in Europe between Protestant and Catholic armies. The Second World War turned into even more of a religious free-for-all in which Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox armies from Allied nations battled counterparts from Axis nations. They all marched off to the front with the prayers of their various pastors and priests ringing in their ears.

Religious patriotic traditions

Though the patriotic traditions of Christianity are highlighted at times of war, their influence has a much broader impact. There are strong patriotic traditions, for instance, that cause people to believe that their nation is in some way uniquely chosen to represent God and enjoy His blessings. This description immediately makes one think of the United States of America, a land whose leaders openly and at every opportunity affirm the belief that their country has a unique place in the eyes of God. It is widely believed by church goers in America that the United States was begun by men of God who envisioned the founding of the USA to be something like the establishment of a

new Israel—a promised land that would be a champion of Christianity. Hundreds of books have been written by American authors touting this perspective. Here is a small sample recently gleaned from a commercial website:

Faith and Freedom: The Christian Roots of American Liberty by Benjamin Hart

Christian Roots of Democracy in America by Arthur Erastus Holt

American Providence: A Nation with A Mission by Stephen H. Webb

Crosswalk: One Nation Under God by Rodrick Purves

This last book was written by the man who wheeled a ten-foot cross eleven-hundred miles along the coast of California. In his writing he often expresses the typical beliefs of many US citizens. An example: *My journey revealed who we are as God's chosen people and the image of America in accordance to the faith of our forefathers and displayed in our God-inspired constitution.*

Powerful patriotic traditions imprint the Christianity of many European nations

Americans are often surprised to hear that there are other countries in which the majority of the people believe it is *their* nation that is the chosen torchbearer for Christ. Ireland, Italy, Poland, Spain, and Greece are five such countries whose national and Christian identities are woven so tightly together that much of the population sees little distinction between them.

These traditions of God's particular favor resting on a nation cannot be traced to any teaching in the scriptures (though it is not unusual for authors or speakers to point to Old Testament promises regarding Israel). Instead, the patriotic traditions of Christianity have been mainly born out of historical events which leaders then glorified by attributing them to the providence of God. The saga of God's favor towards Rome, for example, began when the Roman Caesar Constantine attributed a military victory to the fact that his troops entered a battle wearing the symbol of Christ's cross and came out victorious. Similar historical events and developments were also attributed to the hand of God in the previously mentioned countries as well and served to weld their patriotism to their religion.

The problem with all traditions is that God's holiness is attributed to some object, place, event, action, or person. In the case of patriotic traditions, a whole nation is given a halo of holiness along with its flag, its constitution, its founding fathers, its important days, its monuments, and its identity. National celebrations take on the air of religious enactments in which words of praise are spoken and sung, hats are removed, people rise to their feet, and words of dedication are spoken.

The potent mixture of patriotism and religion in a tradition can also foster a great deal of animosity in a population. There is often no hotter zeal than the zeal for God and country. It's the country part, however, that usually engenders the greater fervor. It is seldom the honor of Christ that motivates ardent patriots to turn into firebrands of righteous indignation. People ready to defend the honor of Christ can seldom be observed anywhere. Jesus' name can be publicly used as a curse and most bystanders will do little more than shrug. If the same thing is done in public to the nation's name or the country's flag, however, the chances are not only good that someone within hearing will say something in protest, but that a dangerous confrontation could easily ensue. It's quite obvious that the patriotic traditions present in many so-called Christian countries are spurred on by greater love for country than love for Christ.

Patriotic traditions have no roots in the Christian scriptures

Though the scriptures teach that the followers of Christ should live as citizens of their country in a way that is worthy of the message of Christ, there is no writer of scripture who encourages or condones any kind of overt patriotism. Nor is there any teaching that would substantiate that God would sometime in the future become the supernatural advocate of an individual country. All instances of this in the world today are based on human tradition and not on contextual information from the Christian scriptures.

We also observe no patriotic fervor on the part of Christ or his apostles. This is significant because they would have had far more reason than anyone living today to take a particularly patriotic stance toward their homeland. Judea actually *was* part of the promised land of the Jews; it did have many historical evidences of the favor of God; and it had many Jewish patriots who were active at the time of Christ. Nevertheless, Jesus never behaved in a noticeably patriotic way. He had no nationalistic agenda.

The ultimate outworking of patriotic traditions, as with most traditions, is that people become diverted from the Kingdom of God and lose sight of the purposes of Christ in the world. Instead, their fervor belongs to the defense and promotion of an earthly kingdom, and making people students of Jesus Christ ceases to be a priority.

The key writing of scripture that addresses the question of the political involvement of a believer in Christ is Paul's letter to the Philippians. It is a remarkable set of instructions that clearly describes the attitude and the behavior of people who have become citizens of heaven. It spells out how a believer in Christ should live worthy of the message of Christ as the citizen of a country.

It should be well noted that the message of the letter to the Philippians is completely ignored by writers who advocate Christian patriotism. Instead, they find their main

patriotic texts in the Jewish scriptures. The fact that they use these texts out of context is of little consequence to them. Human traditions do not arise from men's efforts to be accurate, contextual thinkers in the scriptures. They germinate instead in the hidden desires of men's hearts.

The cultures of Christianity

The tradition of Christianity has a theocratic aspect to it. This means it strives to attain and maintain a political and social situation that is effectively Christian. In other words, it views Christianity as a plan for the world or at least the slice of it that Christianity has carved out for itself. This is why people often think of their culture or their country as Christian. To think such a thought they have to believe that it is possible.

The history of the institutions of Christianity demonstrates that they have never accepted the example of Christ with his students as an adequate goal for them to follow. It is typical for them to strive for more. Whether it is the Roman Catholic Church, the Orthodox Church, the Lutheran Church, the Geneva Church of John Calvin, or the Mormon Church they have all striven to create social, political, and cultural entities that require authorities, institutions, political recognition and involvement, and an expectation of rulership over a well-defined membership. In short, they have seen themselves as agents in the world to change it, possess it, and ultimately to rule it.

This theocratic goal has been pursued at various times with various degrees of intensity. Radical christianizers have not shied away from using armies, inquisitions, and oppression to achieve their ends. Others have spurned violence and chosen to use milder means to influence the world. Though the methods were different, the basic thrust was the same—to build a world that reflects the ideals of Christianity. The result over the centuries has been many christianized cultures in which “Christian” does not mean the words and examples of Jesus Christ but rather the programs and agendas of institutional churches or even governments.

Most European, North American, Australian, and South American countries have significant cultures of this sort. There is an aura of Christianity about them. Church buildings are prominent in their towns and cities, many children bear Christian names, missionary activity is part of their history, the majority of individuals in the society belongs to some institutional church, church schools exert significant influence, church leaders are respected, and traditional Christian holidays are generally observed. In short, this form of cultural Christianity has become so much a part of the woodwork of the western world that it has come to dominate what people understand the words *Christian* and *Christianity* to mean.

There are segments of Christianity that are aware of this culture of Christianity and try to distance themselves from its more extreme practices. They attempt to define what it means to be a Christian in less social or institutional ways and in what they perceive to be a more biblical way. These are often the conservative, evangelical, or fundamental elements of the Christian culture. Though they are more personally engaged in the practice of their religion, in actual behavior, however, they too accept the goals of attaining a christianized culture. In some cases, they even do this with more intensity than the members of the less conservative institutions of Christianity. They are the ones in the United States, for example, who believe one should put “In God We Trust” more into public policy, put prayer back into the public schools, and who favor the perspective that the United States is a Christian nation.

It’s in this cultural mix of religion, politics, education, and popular culture that the traditions of Christianity take on so much influence. They literally become a part of what people consider to be their own identity. For some, for example, to be a good American is to be a good Christian person, a church goer (at least once a year), and a person who is successful, tolerant, fun loving, patriotic, and supportive of good causes. It is in the spread of these kinds of perspectives that Christianity is understood to capture a culture. Thus, one can speak of Christian music, Christian vocations, Christian corporations, Christian communities, Christian lawyers, Christian schools, Christian books, Christian greeting cards, Christian politicians, and even Christian jewelry. It all becomes part of a widespread cultural identity which people question as little as they do any of the religious traditions that are a part of their particular church or area.

Christianity and Democracy

In our day and age there is an almost religious zeal attached to the political philosophy of democracy. In the western world, democracy is generally understood to be intrinsically good—practically godly—and most other political systems are considered primitive or even evil. This goes so far that many of the institutions of Christianity understand democracy to be the *modus operandi* of the Kingdom of God—an interesting oxymoronic conclusion—which could therefore just as well be called the Republic of God. Even the Catholics with their rigid hierarchy of leadership and their all powerful papal prince turn to representative democratic means when it comes to electing the pope. The so-called college of Cardinals is the congress of dignitaries who fulfill this function.

Notwithstanding the appeal of democracy to the political masses, it is a woefully inept system for ascertaining the truth or validity of a matter. If a vote were all it took to determine right from wrong, then every question could simply be put to some electorate and the majority would decide. Though it may seem ludicrous, this is often the way people think when it comes to religious traditions. Though the beginnings of

traditions may be hidden in the shadows, they ultimately thrive on the herd instinct. They become right because so many people go along with them. But does it make any sense that the truth about God can be found by simply determining what any particular majority thinks?

Can, in fact, the truth about anything be determined by majority decision? Just ask the home-town crowd whether the referee was right to call a penalty on their team. Or ask the employees of a company if everyone should get a big raise. Will either group decide objectively and in consideration of all the facts? Aren't the chances, in fact, greater that the majority will lead you astray almost every time? If human nature were inherently pure and objective one might be able to make a case for the majority. Unfortunately, human beings have a tendency to pursue their own advantage and rationalize their own mistakes and they will do this collectively.

One of the things we learn when reading the Jewish scriptures is that it was the habit of the crowds to follow their own desires. They followed the voices promising to give them what they wanted. If the truth could be found anywhere, it was among the few known as the remnant, a small courageous minority of followers who in spite of persecution and ridicule were willing to listen to the voice of God. The prophets, too, were most often solitary men in the midst of populations seldom ready to hear their words. When Moses sent spies into the promised land, the majority of them came back negative about their chances of coming out on top in a battle. Only two believed the Israelites could take the land as God had promised.

The same was true of the Jews at the time of Christ. The crowds were fickle. If something seemed to be to the advantage of the people, then they flowed in like a great tide, but when things seemed to turn and the advantage was gone, they flowed back. The leaders of the Jews were the same. They were constantly looking for their own advantage. True interest in following the scriptures was never their base motive. They were hypocrites who twisted words to support their own interests.

Jesus taught his students to avoid the actions of the majority. He said that the road to life was a narrow one. Jesus' true followers were always a small and seemingly disadvantaged number of dedicated men and women.

Paul and the other original students of Christ found out for themselves that the crowds were never ready to follow Christ. It was typical for Paul to communicate intensively with large numbers of people in a city and to come away with only two or three who showed any interest in following Christ.

Those first students of Christ also found that people preferred leaders who acted like big shots and who promised them great things. Paul wrote to the Corinthians that they had come to prefer men whom Paul called false apostles and to ignore the real ones.

In other words, Christ's chosen apostles found out very soon that the student was not greater than the teacher. They found themselves being treated like Christ and being rejected like Christ. Within his lifetime, Paul was relegated to—in his own words—the throwaways. He witnessed the growth of a traditional Christianity that within one generation of Christ had already begun to rework Jesus' message into a more palatable version for the masses. It is this "revised" version that spawned the institutionalized church of the following centuries.

So it is today as well. People prefer teachers who promise them some worldly advantage. The message and examples of the original students of Christ are not taken seriously. Few want to share their fate; few want to take a road that leads to a cross; few want to follow Christ simply because he is the Son of God. In the end, the great majority will always be interested in its own interests.

The Kingdom of God will never be a democracy. There is a king and he has revealed his will in both word and deed. His citizens take no vote to determine his authority. He does not run for election. He is not replaced every four years. His Kingdom is not of this world.