



BA

BIBLE ADVOCATE

July - August 2006

God and Country

U.S. religious roots (p. 4)

Loving the enemy (p. 9)

War in the world (p. 18)



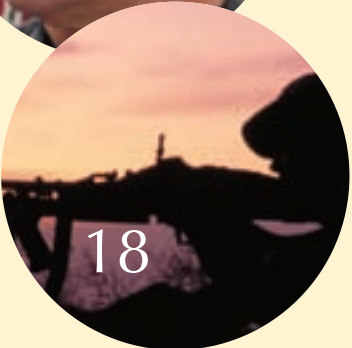
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Miss the last issue on men and fathers? View selections from it and download the last eight BA's at www.cog7.org/BA.

Coming in the September BA: labor and rest (Sabbath); finances and wealth; prayer for Islam

In the July and August issues of *Now What?*: dealing with depression, learning from a daughter's illness (<http://nowwhat.cog7.org>)

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Hot Topics

July weather on the Texas coast is not hard to predict: hot and humid. During our eight years in Houston, we tried to prevent summer slump at church by preaching on themes suggested by members. “Hot Topics You Asked For,” we called it; and they offered some warm ones, like religious symbols (the cross, flags), celebration of birthdays, angels, and Christ’s boyhood.

How should we respond to hot (read “controversial”) issues in the Christian church? More important, how do you respond to doctrinal controversy at your church? Do you think that, since Christians read the same Bible and receive the same Spirit, they should mostly agree on matters of faith and practice and that if they don’t, one of them must be seriously wrong? If so, 1 Corinthians 1:10 may be your favorite text.

The same God of truth who inspired that good verse also inspired this one: “One person esteems one day above another; another esteems every day alike. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind” (Romans 14:5). All of Romans 14, in fact, is a Magna Carta of Christian freedom to obey the Lord as we see fit in doubtful matters without being overruled by those who claim superior knowledge. In several verses of this chapter (find them), the apostle urges us not to judge others who follow Christ differently than we regarding doubtful (read “hot”) issues.

A lot rides on this subject. The church-and-state controversy is a hot topic in the U.S. Here and in every other nation, Christians have dual citizenship. We belong to one kingdom on earth and another in heaven: Christ and Caesar. Honoring them both as Scripture teaches presents real dilemmas that differ by place and time. In ’06 America, for example, believers often disagree on how to balance their duties to God and country. That’s what much of this BA is about.

This may be our hottest issue of the year. It represents the attempt to find biblical balance on matters of church and state. When something you read raises your temperature, read Romans 14 again and remember how much we all have yet to learn. Then write your convictions and send them our way; we may use them on our letters page. And learn to appreciate that God saves everyone in Christ the same, regardless of how much we disagree on hot issues.

— Calvin Burrell



The background of the page is a photograph of a church interior. It shows rows of dark wooden pews on a red carpeted aisle. In the background, there are several tall, narrow, arched windows with dark frames, through which bright light is streaming. The overall atmosphere is warm and solemn.

America as a Christian Nation

History and the Bible reveal different pictures of our religious roots. by Richard A. Wiedenheft

In recent years, there has been much talk about the United States being a Christian nation with a special place in God's plan. Some see us as a nation miraculously brought into being by God – through Christians, for Christians, and based on Christian values. As long as we served God, we were blessed.

But lately our godly people have been corrupted by pluralism, secularism, and moral relativism accompanied by a great influx of non-Christian immigrants; consequently, we are no longer being blessed. Preachers and pundits argue that we need to return to the Christianity of our founders and take back the country from the secularists and sinners so that we can once again be blessed.

Certainly, no one can deny that America is the most powerful nation on earth, a land of great liberty and opportunity that was strongly influenced by Christianity. But does the historical record support the claim that we are a Christian nation? Does Scripture support it? Does America really qualify to be called by the name of our Savior?

Early settlers

When we think of the founders of this country, the men who signed the Declaration of Independence and hammered out the Constitution come to mind. But the colonists who came before 1776 were also founders, and many of them were deeply religious people. The Pilgrims, the Puritans, English Roman Catholics, Quakers, and many other persecuted religious mi-

norities came to the New World seeking freedom to worship God as they believed they should.

But this is only part of the picture. Most colonies, including Plymouth and Maryland, were established primarily for trade and profit by businessmen or joint stock companies that financed them. Many of the early pioneers, though cultural Christians, were not motivated primarily by religion. Frustrated by the lack of opportunities and especially land in Europe, they came to the colonies where land was cheap and plentiful.

The settlers at Jamestown, Virginia, for example, came in 1607 expecting to find gold and silver. They almost perished because, among other reasons, they spent more time looking for precious metals and growing tobacco than seeking grain for food. Selfishly, they abused the system of indentured servitude and, after 1619, began buying African slaves.¹

Religion played a central role in the lives of almost all Europeans in this period, including those who came to the New World. But it was certainly not the only factor. As in all ages, people relocate to find better opportunities for themselves and their children. Does this mixture of people — some motivated by religion, some by economic gain, and some by both — deserve the label “Christian”?

Colonial religion

While most colonies were established specifically for profit and trade, a few were founded as societies where true Christian belief and practice could flourish and where the government would be an expression of what

they believed was the “right” religion. John Winthrop and the Puritans envisioned their community would be a “city upon a hill,” a light for the world to see — as long as they were true to their God. In this Puritan theocracy, modeled to a great extent on Old Testament Israel, church membership was required for political participation and failure to attend services was punishable by law. Clergymen exerted tremendous influence.

New England preachers were well-known for their Jeremiads denouncing the lack of commitment among their congregants. No wonder. Many were simply cultural Christians who weren’t born again. In fact, the famous preacher Jonathan Edwards was voted out of his Northampton, Massachusetts, church in 1750, partly because he had concluded that only people who publicly confessed and practiced their faith should be members. It was a novel and unpopular idea.²

Less than six years after Winthrop and the Puritans left England to escape persecution, they became persecutors themselves. They threatened Baptist minister Roger Williams with deportation to England for promoting his views on individual freedom of conscience, separation of church and state, and respect for Indian rights — all of which threatened their theocracy. Williams fled to what is now Rhode Island and established a settlement there.³

Beginning in 1656, the Puritan government persecuted Quakers, eventually hanging four before the law was weakened under pressure from, of all people, King Charles II in England and because of public opinion against such drastic measures. And, of course, in Puritan Massachusetts the infamous Salem witch trials took place in 1692. Nineteen people were hanged for witchcraft in accordance with colonial laws based on the Old Testament.

Does this mixture of people — some motivated by religion, some by economic gain, and some by both — deserve the label “Christian”?

If America is to be regarded as a Christian nation based on the personal beliefs of the Founding Fathers, a significant part of that basis will have to be the cultural Christianity of deists and skeptics.

Massachusetts prided itself on being a Christian enterprise; but in reality it was a mixture of good and evil, of devout believers and nominal Christians, of zealous churchmen and ruthless politicians. There was terrible treatment of Indians who were regarded as the Canaanites in the believers' "promised land." Can this colony be stamped with the name of Jesus Christ? Noll, Hatch, and Marsden argue that the answer should be no. Otherwise, "In such cases the name of Christianity will be superimposed on a culture that retains some essentially anti-Christian features. Puritan culture, then, for all its merits, can hardly qualify as a model Christian culture."⁴

Founders' religious beliefs

Some have argued that the U.S. should be considered a Christian nation because of the deep religious convictions of her primary founders. But the matter is not that simple. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, belief in God was taken for granted by the vast majority of Europeans, and religion was widely accepted as an essential

part of the social order. It permeated every aspect of life. Politicians sprinkled their speeches with references to "Providence" or "Nature's God," just as modern politicians use the name of God to say "God bless America." However, this kind of public talk tells us little about someone's personal religious convictions and motives.

Consider Thomas Jefferson, primary author of the Declaration of Independence. Though a member of the established church of Virginia, he was a deist — one who believes that God made the world but doesn't intervene in its affairs and that reason, not revelation, is of ultimate value. Jefferson respected Jesus as a great moral teacher but scoffed at the idea of anything miraculous (redemption through the Cross and Resurrection) and even took time to produce his own Bible version, which omitted anything he considered fanciful.⁵

Benjamin Franklin too was a deist and, according to the Library of Congress, so was lifelong church member John Adams.⁶ George Washington was a member of the Episcopalian church and served as a vestry-

man, but the duties of that office were primarily political. Much research has been done to demonstrate that Washington was a practicing Christian, but the evidence is scant. His own diaries indicate that, except when he served as president, he was rarely in church. In addition, considerable evidence reveals that he consistently avoided taking communion. George Washington was a man of great patience, understanding, wisdom, honor, and courage; but there is virtually no evidence he ever expressed faith in Jesus Christ.

Certainly, many devout Christians lived among those who formed this great nation. But if America is to be regarded as a Christian nation based on the personal beliefs of the Founding Fathers, a significant part of that basis will have to be the cultural Christianity of deists and skeptics.

Founding documents

The men who signed the Declaration of Independence and the delegates who framed the Constitution realized the role of religion in the western world. They knew about the positive benefits of churches, but they also knew of all the blood shed in religious wars in Europe during and after the Reformation. They knew the religious and political hypocrisy and corruption created by state-supported churches. They knew about all the "heretics" burned at European stakes — by the authority of church-dominated governments. They were well aware of one hundred and fifty years of Puritan New England history, with its intertwining of church and state and its persecu-

tion of dissenters. And they knew that the majority of the colonies had an officially sanctioned and supported church along with religious requirements for office holders that excluded Catholics, atheists, and anyone who didn't accept the Bible and Jesus Christ.

The delegates who gathered in Philadelphia in 1787 could easily have written a constitution along the lines of that of one or more of the colonies. Instead they chose to create a document that established a government completely separate from any church or specific religious belief. They included in Article VI a statement forbidding any religious test for any public office.

During the debate over ratification, many decried the fact that the proposed Constitution didn't even mention the name of God. Nevertheless, the Constitution was ratified by all thirteen colonies and went into effect in 1789. The same year ten amendments to the Constitution, called the Bill of Rights, were adopted. The first stated, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof. . . ."

The concept of separation of church and state was new at the time, and many feared that without the support of each other, church and state could not survive. But two hundred years of experience has proven the opposite. The nation has thrived, and the gospel has flourished in this free marketplace of religious ideas. So have efforts to publish Bibles, translate them into other languages, and send missionaries throughout the world.

Judges and various court decisions, state legislators, and politi-

cians may claim that America is a Christian nation; but those claims don't make it so. Our founding document — specifically, Article VI and the First Amendment — explicitly builds a wall of separation between church and state, to use Jefferson's words.

In summarizing all the factors that went into the formation of this new nation, Noll, Hatch, and Marsden write:

The key to understanding the American Revolution is balance. The Revolution was not Christian, but it stood for many things compatible with the Christian faith. It was not biblical, though many of its leaders respected Scripture. It did not establish the United States on a Christian foundation, even if it created many commendable precedents.⁷

Christian nation

But what does the Bible say about the idea of a Christian nation? Could the United States qualify?

From the time of Abraham onward, God had a special people He called His own, a people who became the nation of Israel. But after her leaders rejected His Son and her Messiah, God opened the door for individuals of all nations to become His people. As Peter put it to the Gentile, Cornelius, "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right" (Acts 10:34, 35). Paul proclaimed, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28). He also wrote:

For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile

— the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Romans 10:12, 13).

Through faith in Jesus Christ, people of all races, genders, or nationalities are the one people of God. Peter wrote, "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God . . ." (1 Peter 2:9). This royal priesthood of individuals is the only true Christian nation. And, as Jesus pointed out to Pontius Pilate, it is not a kingdom of this world (John 18:36) but a spiritual nation, whose citizens are scattered throughout the world.

In contrast, physical nations, including the U.S., are and always have been a mix of good

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More on the Web

Procon.org (www.procon.org) attempts to present the reasons for and against various issues. The section on using God's name in government documents is found at www.undergodprocon.org.

Americans United for Separation of Church and State (www.au.org), supported by many Christians, believes in strong separation of religious involvement in government affairs.

Wallbuilders (www.wallbuilders.com) promotes the religious heritage of our country and would like to see it returned to its "Christian" roots.
— Richard A. Wiedenheft

Questions & Answers

Do you consider the Holy Spirit to be a person, as do most Christian churches? Is He the third person of the Trinity? I have had the impression that you regard the Holy Spirit as essentially the impersonal power of God.

Your question must be answered with humility, “For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known” (1 Cor. 13:12). Peering into the heavenlies, we perceive only what the earthly words of Scripture reveal. Adequate and inspiring though they be, these words do not reduce an infinite, holy Being into simple notions for our mastery.

Father and *Son*, for example, are word signs that convey truth about the Divine. Familial words cannot, however, express all the truth of the Christian deity, nor are all facts about earthly fathers and sons equally true of God.

Much depends on how the word *person* is understood. Like *Father* and *Son*, *person* is a partial carrier of divine truth but not a complete and exhaustive one. Though not used in Scripture, it may be a good word to refer to the thinking, feeling, willing, communicating, loving being we know as God. But we must not conclude that the divine Person will conform to all attributes of the human.

In Christianity at large, *Trinity* refers to the one, true God who exists eternally in three equal persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Our church’s position dissents from orthodox creeds for the very reason you pinpoint: We do not understand Scripture to reveal the Holy Spirit as a person in the same sense that Father and Son are persons.

The previous sentence finds support in several Bible facts. The divine Father and Son are consistently mentioned in the salutations, benedictions, and doxologies of New Testament epistles; the Holy Spirit

is rarely mentioned there. The Father and Son reign on heaven’s throne, as seen in vision (Acts 7:55, 56; Rev. 4 and 5); the Spirit is not depicted as reigning there. The Father and Son engage in dialogue of the “I-Thou” sort (John 12:27, 28, for example), and love for the Other is expressed (5:20; 10:17; 14:31); the Holy Spirit never enters this dialogue. The Holy Spirit is not addressed in prayer or worship as are the Father and Son, nor are we taught to worship the Spirit as a distinct divine person.

Given the importance traditionally assigned to the Trinity doctrine, these omissions are so striking that they can hardly be dismissed as arguments from silence. They suggest to us that the Deity may exist in two personality centers rather than three.

On the other hand, we perceive the Spirit as more than an impersonal influence or the extension of God’s power. We note personal attributes and actions of the Spirit (intelligence, will, affection) in Scripture. Though both masculine and neuter nouns are used, the Bible refers to the Spirit with the pronoun *He*, not *it*. Although He is “another Helper” (14:16), the personal pronoun need not refer to a third person, since the Spirit seems personally indistinguishable from the Father-Son dyad. The Holy Spirit is, after all, the Spirit of God and the Spirit of Christ.

Based on this evidence, we think of the Spirit as the personal presence of the Father and Son among and within God’s people, rather than as a third person of the Trinity. Our trust is that God has bestowed salvation by His grace in the person and work of Christ and that salvation is realized in human experience through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, not by the affirmation of any extra-biblical creed.

— Elder Calvin Burrell

Blessing Beyond Borders



Why “God Bless America” doesn’t do full justice to our calling. by Jason Overman

At night, after my three-year-old twins have gone to bed, I often find myself hovering over them as they sleep. Wanting to reach out and bless them, I rest my hands on their heads and softly recite:

The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make His face shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up His countenance upon you, and give you peace (Numbers 6:24-26).

As I meditate on the Lord’s well-being over my little ones, I realize, as Jacob must have, that being blessed is no guarantee against life’s pains. It is the gift of God’s presence regardless of life’s circumstances, the assurance that He goes with us and that our lives are caught up and finally at rest in His ultimate and infinite purpose (Genesis 28, 32).

At the same time, I am reminded that being a people of blessing means more than just

being blessed. It means that we are the bearers of blessing to the world. Jesus’ words explain the lengths to which this blessing must be borne:

“Love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:44, 45a).

Blessing what we love is natural, but blessing our enemies and those who curse us — well, that’s another matter. Nothing is natural about loving the enemy. That’s why throughout the Sermon on the Mount Jesus portrays the “children of God” as those who love, not as mere people do but as those who have transcended the natural and love as their heavenly Father loves: “For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do

the same?” (v. 46). As the Son of God, Jesus Christ has fully revealed the extent to which the love and blessing of God can be shared. And He calls us to follow His example.

It may seem that we have taken an enormous leap from the gentle consolations of Aaron to this staggering command of Christ. However, these are not isolated blessings but chapters within the long story of blessing that the Bible tells.

Blessing and curse

The Bible begins with a divine blessing. As God was concluding His labor of creation, He paused — like any proud father — and blessed His children: “Be fruitful and multiply” (Genesis 1:28). Here, blessing is expressed as the power for life as God envisions it. But in a few short chapters, this power is shattered by the unfaithfulness of sin. Where bless-

ing once held sway, its opposite, “the curse,” insinuates itself; the fruitful life is fractured.

The stories that follow — Cain and Abel, the Flood, the tower of Babel — all bear the pervasive stamp of the curse. But the Creator has not given up on His creation. By Genesis 12 we are introduced to a family of faith who will be God’s vehicle for the renewal of creation’s blessing. In Abraham and his seed “all the nations of the earth shall be blessed” (18:18; 22:18; 26:4). Of course, Abraham and Sarah have no seed; they are barren, victims of the curse themselves. Yet God promises and they trust; God intervenes and they are made fruitful (17:6; 28:3; 48:4).

This is the defining rhythm of their lives and the story that they pass along. What was lost in Eden will be recovered; the curse that reigns in creation will be reversed. Subsequently, when this family blesses, it is a word of power for a fallen world, for it links us to creation’s peaceable origin and destination. It binds us to the God who promised through the law and prophets to send “showers of blessing” that recall the Eden we long for (Ezekiel 34:25-28).

The promise of blessing finds its fulfillment in the cross of Christ. The Messiah is the seed who has taken the pain of sin

and death upon Himself so that “the blessing of Abraham might come on the Gentiles [nations] . . .” (Galatians 3:14) and so that the whole world, with Israel, may know the fruitfulness that resides in His life and Spirit (5:22). Christ’s sacrifice names the love of God for a creation He would bless. In Christ, God has laid His hands upon a sleeping world and blessed it with a Father’s love.

Blessing our enemies

Considering Christ’s sacrifice, is it too much for us to bless our enemies? Often, however, we minimize Jesus’ command as a “hard saying” and ignore it. But when we understand that Christ speaks and acts within the context of the Bible’s larger story — in fact, as the climax of the story — we can’t ignore the centrality and importance of blessing our enemies.

On the cross our High Priest broke down the walls of fear and hate that divide and destroy, and in their place He blesses and rebuilds (Ephesians 2). In His life our lives are transformed. We bless, as He did, because we belong to a kingdom defined not by sin and death but by resurrection and life.

In light of such a story, we cannot ignore Jesus’ radical instructions to bless our enemies.

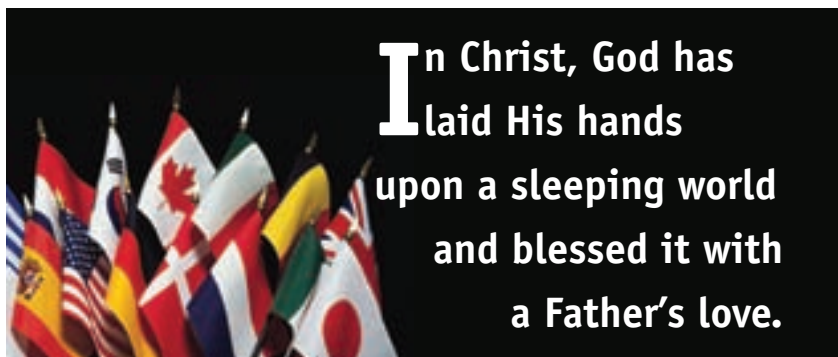
Indeed, the theme is everywhere in the New Testament (Luke 6:28; Romans 12:13, 14; 1 Corinthians 4:12). Peter goes so far as to suggest that this kind of blessing is the special calling of the Christian: “not returning evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary blessing, knowing that you were called to this, that you may inherit a blessing” (1 Peter 3:9).

Hoarding the blessing

Like the world around us, we Christians too often bless our own and consider it absurd to bless our enemies — despite our calling. This is evident not just in our personal lives but especially in our national experiences. We often hear Christians ardently cry, “God bless America” when she is marching off to war. But we have been called to bless all the nations of the earth, not just America. In a single stroke, is it possible that we invert our calling and hoard the blessing for ourselves as we dispense death upon the enemy?

Christians of all nations may be challenged by some of last century’s most infamous examples of religious countries failing to love their enemies. It is common knowledge, for example, that Hitler often invoked the blessing of Almighty God upon 1930s’ Germany and that large segments of the Christian church said “Amen” by supporting his Nazi regime as it spread terror across Europe.

More recently, we witnessed in the former Yugoslavia the ethnic cleansing of Bosnian Muslims by Christian Bosnian Serbs, which Metropolitan Nikolaj, the highest ranking church official in



Bosnia, endorsed as “the hard road of Christ.” Serbian priests, in their nationalistic fervor, would bless the militias returning from “kill-and-plunder expeditions.” On one church feast day, Christians “celebrated . . . by burning down the 300-year old mosque at Trebinje and massacring the town’s Muslims.”

Concerning this and other incidents, Richard B. Hays turns the focus on America as he writes:

At this cultural distance, it appears easy to condemn such violence as a perversion of Christian ethics, but what are we to say about the Catholic military chaplain who administered mass to the Catholic bomber pilot who dropped the atomic bomb on Nagasaki in 1945? Father George Zabelka, chaplain for the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bomb squadrons, later came to repent of his complicity in the bombing of civilians, but his account of that time is a stunning judgment on the church’s acquiescence in violence.¹

While many argue that dropping these atomic bombs saved lives — both Japanese and American — by bringing World War II to a swift end, the words of the chaplain should make us think long and hard about the matter of Christian involvement in many of the twentieth century’s violent deaths:

To fail to speak to the utter moral corruption of the mass destruction of civilians was to fail as a Christian and as a priest as I see it. . . . I was there, and I’ll tell you that the operational moral atmosphere in the church in relation to mass bombing of enemy civilians was totally indifferent, silent, and corrupt



at best — at worst it was religiously supportive of these activities by blessing those who did them. . . . I, like the Catholic pilot of the Nagasaki plane, “The Great Artist,” was heir to a Christianity that had for seventeen hundred years engaged in revenge, murder, torture, the pursuit of power, and prerogative violence, all in the name of our Lord.²

Whether agreeing with Hays or not, we must admit that the Christian church has often been hijacked by interests both self-serving and far removed from God’s intention. In our own times of terror and temptation, we should contrast these doubtful anecdotes of blessing with Isaiah’s vision of blessing for Israel and her most bitter enemies:

In that day Israel will be one of three with Egypt and Assyria — a blessing in the midst of the land, whom the Lord of hosts shall bless, saying, “Blessed is Egypt My people, and Assyria the work of My hands, and Israel My inheritance” (Isaiah 19:24, 25).

Challenge and calling

Blessing the enemy is grasping the end from the middle. It is nothing less than bearing witness to God’s peaceable kingdom even as we await its fullness.

The challenge before us, then, is blessing beyond our borders, beyond our safety, beyond our imaginations, as our Lord taught and showed us. Can we bless as He did while looking down from the cross at the Roman soldiers who put Him there: “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do” (Luke 23:34; compare Stephen, Acts 7:60)?

If we succeed, it will only be because we have found ourselves to be more conformed to a crucified Lord than to a conquering Caesar, more trusting in resurrection than in war. Blessing like this may not be easy; it may not come naturally. But as Christians, it is our calling; it is the gospel. **PH**

Jason Overman serves the congregation in Jasper, AR.

References

1. Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, p. 318
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 318-319



Would I Have Signed?

by Roger Palms

I counted four references to God in the short document that is our American Declaration of Independence.

Big deal, you may be saying. So what?

Well, it is a big deal.

References to God by our country's founders tend to bother some people. We speak today of separation of church and state, but the founders were quite clear about God and country. The separation of church and state spoken of so much now wasn't spoken of when the country was founded. In fact, nine of the thirteen colonies had established churches supported by taxation. That was a problem back then. Smaller groups that wanted the freedom to worship as they chose pushed for elimination of the "state" church.

In time, separation of church and state happened, encouraged especially by Thomas Jefferson, who first used the words in a letter to concerned clergy in 1805. He wrote, "The First Amendment has erected a wall of separation between Church and State." Those words were not used to keep religion out of the state but to assure concerned religious groups that the state would not control them or support selected church bodies with state taxes.

This was a protection for worshippers. The founders were patriots; many were deists, not Christians as we use the term. But they understood the need for personal faith within government even as they protected us all by not having a national denomination or religious test for office-holding.

Keeping all that in mind, I reread the Declaration of Independence and thought about those days when people died fighting for what was declared in this document. That's what we celebrate on the Fourth of July.

Now here we are, more than two centuries later, still growing, changing, evolving as a nation, yet rooted in this document that separated us from ever again being a colony of another government.

Visit Lexington, Massachusetts, sometime when the residents there are reenacting the engagement between British regulars and the minutemen. What happened that day in April 1775, more than a year before the signing of the Declaration of Independence, will give you a real sense of history and especially about commitment to liberty. By then, Patrick Henry had already given his famous speech "Give Me Liberty or Give Me Death." (By the way, Patrick

Henry refers to God six times in that speech, which was delivered on March 23, 1775, more than a year before the Declaration was signed.)

What will you do on the Fourth? Will you go for a day at the beach, have a picnic, watch fireworks? Will you also pause, reflect, think about what it means to be a free people, governed by those we choose? Will you take a few minutes and talk together as a family about what freedom means to you?

Our country's founders took a terrible risk; they were willing to do it. They pledged "our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor." Would I have signed a document like that? Would you? That's a good question to ask each other on the Fourth of July. That's a good question for each of us to ask ourselves.

Those founders were trusting God when they wrote and signed that document, and they said so. "Appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world," they wrote.

"With a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence," they declared.

Those are still powerful words.

Roger Palms, former editor of *Decision* magazine, writes from Fort Myers, FL.

Balancing Act: Saints and Citizens

Can Christians love God and country at the same time? by Jerry McClenagan



Skjold Photographs

When Old Glory passes by, my hand instinctively goes to my heart. When America's national anthem plays, my eyes well up. When I sing "America the Beautiful," my voice breaks with emotion. Are these patriotic feelings proper for anyone devoted to the God who loves people of all countries the same? Should a follower of Christ, in good conscience, promote the culture and interests of one nation above the rest?

In his article "How the Kingdom Comes," seminary professor Michael S. Horton wrote:

It was confusing to grow up singing both "This World Is Not My Home" and "This Is My Father's World" . . . two common and seemingly contradictory Christian responses to culture (ChristianityToday.com, January 13, 2006).

Mr. Horton is not the only Christian to be conflicted by

these questions. Many of us wonder how to love our country and God's "country" (Hebrews 11:16) at the same time.

Divine counsels

The Scriptures teach us 1) to honor the king and let our light shine in current culture and 2) to not love the world nor be conformed to its system. These two divine counsels are equally true and must be held in tension by the people of God.

To some, the conflict is resolved mostly through praying "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10), then leaving it all in God's hands. To them, the answer lies in full separation from any political activity or patriotic gesture. These people of faith confess, as did saints of old, that they are strangers on earth (Hebrews 11:13b). And they understand that to

mean they should not vote, hold office, or be involved in ordinary political service.

Others, however, find their way in public and political service, much as the prophet Daniel did in Babylon. They sense a responsibility to be involved, taking their cue from God's instruction to Israel: "Seek the peace of the city where I have caused you to be carried away captive . . . for in its peace you will have peace" (Jeremiah 29:7).

Since this world is not home for us as Christians, should we become involved in social and cultural issues? Should we participate in the civic or political arenas to let our voices be heard? The apostle Paul can help us answer these questions.

A Roman citizen

Paul respected the government in place and charged

Christians to do the same (Romans 13). Knowing the risk that believers face in many places, he urged prayers for those in authority (1 Timothy 2:1-3). While his primary objective was freedom to share the gospel rather than political action, Paul recommended that Christians be respectful, responsible citizens in this world.

Paul claimed his own rights as a Roman citizen. Indicted and facing the authorities, he defended himself as having done nothing wrong against Jewish law, the temple, or Caesar (Acts 22:28; 25:8). Then he appealed to Caesar, leading to new opportunities for the gospel.

Christian responsibility in social and cultural matters is imperative, as Paul says:

Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands, just as we told you, so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody (1 Thessalonians 4:11, 12, NIV).

We are being watched, so Paul enjoins us to keep our behavior blameless so we can be lights in this world (Philippians 2:15).

Patriots for God

David petitioned God to build up the walls of Jerusalem and pray for its peace (Psalm 51:18; 122:6, 7). Keep in mind, though, that David's intense desire and prayer for the capital city was for God's nation and people, an ar-

gument we can hardly make for any country today.

A patriot is one who loves his country and defends and promotes its interests. This can be Christ-like. Jesus, like David, declared His love for Jerusalem (Matthew 23:37, 38). Christ's patriotic lament went beyond security and prosperity to the spiritual welfare of that beloved city.

Patriotism for any country today should acknowledge that our truest hope is for the establishment of God's eternal kingdom on earth. For me, "O beautiful for patriot dream/That sees beyond the years" echoes the Lord's prayer "Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Christian patriots must align their loyalty with the enduring city yet to come (Hebrews 13:14).

What Others Say

In an op-ed earlier this year, Cal Thomas addressed the subject of social causes: "What is it with evangelical Christians that so many of them need a cause beyond the commission they've been given?" He refers, of course, to the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19, 20). Writing on global warming, Thomas says, "Should they [National Association of Evangelicals] desire a real effect on the planet, let them return to the eternal message that has been given them to share with a world that needs it now more than ever" (*The Environment*, February 14, 2006).

Chuck Colson takes a slightly different tack than Thomas. Responding to those who accuse the so-called Religious Right of trying to impose its views on America, he says: "It's an outrageous charge, because no private group in a democracy can 'impose' views. We Christians simply contend for our position in the open market." Admitting that some religious leaders cause him to "shudder" because of their "power brokering," Colson contends that "Our cultural mandate requires us to work for justice and righteousness so that God's creation reflects his majesty and goodness. That includes engaging in politics" (ChristianityToday.com, January 23, 2006).

— Jerry McClenagan

Seeking balance

Christians can honor their country by being thankful and enthusiastic about her benefits and qualities that God has blessed, just as Isaiah praised God for making Israel great (Isaiah 26:15). Many Americans believe this country was founded on Christian principles. At one time, perhaps, it more nearly reflected the words of Psalm 33:12: "Blessed is the nation whose God is the LORD." Because of this, the deepest sense of patriotism for America can be expressed by God's people.


At the same time, we must not deny our country's many sins and failures. Our prayers for America and her leaders may include this tone: "Remember, O LORD, what has happened to us;

look, and see our disgrace"; and this cry: "Those who pursue us are at our heels [i.e., terrorist attacks]; we are weary and find no rest" (Lamentations 5:1, 5, NIV). Acknowledging that much of this society is on a binge of immorality and selfishness, we turn again to these words:

"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" (2 Chronicles 7:14, NIV).

Thus, we wrestle with how to be in the world but not of it, as Jesus said. Bible counsel about heavenly citizenship, ambassadors for Christ, and separation (Philippians 3:20; John 17:15-18; 18:36; 2 Corinthians 5:20) must be taken seriously. To embrace the world is to become an enemy of God (James 4:4).

On the other hand, the same Scripture calls us repeatedly to follow the example of Christ, who left heaven to serve amid the dirt and grime of humanity with its political and social structures. To withdraw from the world would be to hide our lights under a bushel (Matthew 5:14-16).

May we achieve a proper balance between these two callings and be sincere in our efforts. 

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America as a Christian Nation

continued from page 7


and bad, of generosity and selfishness, of sublime self-sacrifice and incredible self-indulgence. Since Constantine first legitimized Christianity and gave the church a role in the political process, western nations have been a blend of born-again Christians, cultural Christians, and infidels. And while in some countries during some periods the Christian influence in the mix has been strong, the whole should not be called Christian.

When we tie the name of Christ to a nation, even to our beloved United States, we do serious injury to the cause of the gospel. When we ascribe the name of our Lord to an earthly, political enterprise, we take what is holy, spiritual, eternal, and sublime and drag it into the realm of the kingdoms of men that will one day perish.

As Christians, we devote tremendous resources to sending people to far-flung corners of the earth to proclaim the gospel among people of other cultures, races, and religious backgrounds. One would think that when such people show up in our communities, we would rejoice that the mission field has come to our doorstep. Instead we complain that our "Christian" nation is being tainted by unbelievers. Would Jesus approve of our exclusive attitudes?

If we want to take something back for Jesus, it should be the hearts and minds of individuals — what Jesus seeks to capture. The gospel cause is not about

winning back a country to something it never really was but about winning the hearts of individuals in any and every country to an eternal kingdom.

As Americans, we love our country with its freedom and opportunities and relative security. And we can be proud to live under what may be the best form of government created by human beings. But our country is still a nation of this world, full of people who need the transforming power of the gospel. It is a nation like all nations that will one day be swallowed up by the kingdom of Christ — the only nation that deserves to be called Christian (Daniel 2:44; Revelation 11:15). 

Scripture quotations were taken from the *New International Version*.



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We Ask . . . about church and state

1 Is America, or any other modern state, a Christian nation? Should Christians and the Bible have more influence in national law and policy than other faiths, or than no faith?

2 Was this nation founded by God-fearing Christians? Or do American roots reflect the struggle between zealous Bible believers seeking sanctuary and others of various religious stripes who favored a more open society and a wall between church and state?

3 How important is political action (elections, passage of law, court action, intervention by public officials) in establishing and maintaining a moral and just society? What part should political action play in a church seeking to obey the Great Commission of Christ?

4 The U.S. Constitution states that no religious test may be imposed upon those who seek public office. How important is it that our leaders are people of faith? That they are Christians? That they give public expression to their faith, as does President Bush?

Reader response to any of these questions will be considered for publication and will be edited for length and clarity. — Editor

The Great Debate

On one hand . . .

By the First Amendment, no U.S. law may prohibit the free exercise of religious faith.

“In God We Trust” became the official U.S. motto by an act of Congress in 1956, and “Under God” was added to the Pledge of Allegiance for the U.S. flag.

Scripture texts and figures are sculpted on public buildings in the nation’s capital, in state capitals, and in major U.S. cities. “Laus Deo” (meaning “Praise be to God”) is inscribed atop the Washington Monument, towering over every other structure in D.C.

Recognition of “Almighty God,” “Supreme Being,” or “Sovereign Ruler of the Universe” is written into the constitutions — usually the preambles — of all fifty of the United States.

Thus, faith in God is a part of the bedrock philosophy and practice of this nation.

It is every Christian’s duty to submit to the laws of the nation, to honor and pray for its leaders, and to recognize those who provide for public safety as God’s servants.

On the other hand . . .

By the same amendment, no U.S. law may establish the exercise of one faith over another.

Public references to religion seldom mention the name Jesus Christ. To do so would seem to establish Christianity as an official religion, implying that people of other faiths — or no faith — are not true Americans.

Founders of the U.S. never intended that faith in Jesus Christ, with its attendant moral standards, be imposed upon every citizen in a country based on freedom — including the freedom of religion.

Because of frequent public allusions to God and Scripture, America is called a religious country. But it cannot be accurately said that this is a Christian nation. Any country is “Christian” only to the extent that its citizens are personally committed to Christ and controlled by His Word.

For a Christian, duty to Jesus Christ stands over and above duty to country. When the two are in direct conflict, the faithful must choose to obey God rather than man.

WWJD



What would Jesus do or say about the issues of church and state?

Although born into a Jewish family and culture, Jesus did not support the idea of theocracy like in ancient Israel. He knew that first century Judaism was not the kingdom of God on earth, nor could it be.

Rather than lead a political effort to establish the kingdom in Israel, Jesus taught His followers to seek first the kingdom of God — the inward righteousness of a heart where God reigns. That kingdom, said He, was among them in the person of Christ and would be within them when the Holy Spirit was fully come. Jesus expressly denied that His purpose was to restore a literal, political kingdom among men during this age (Acts 1:6-8).

With little or no evidence to the contrary, we may properly assume that Jesus lived in quiet obedience to the political rules and rulers of His day. He had dozens of reasons to oppose local and national authorities or to lead a noisy, public revolt as did others in first century Palestine. But He did not.

Deference to public officials may be seen by the absence of complaints or criticism toward them from the lips of our Lord. (The nearest we find is His reference to

Herod as “that fox.”) We conclude that as one who kept His Father’s commandments, Jesus obeyed this statute of the Torah also: “You shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people” (Acts 23:5; Ex. 22:28).

Those in Christian leadership may be disconcerted to note that Christ saved His harshest criticism for the religious authorities of His day. He regularly assailed their hypocrisy, their externalism, their pride in public performance, their self-made regulations, and their focus on detail while overlooking the love, mercy, and justice of authentic faith. Read Christ’s withering challenges to them in Matthew 23, Luke 11, and John 3—10.

Regarding the state, Christ affirmed the duty of paying taxes, both state and temple (Matt. 22:17-21; 17:24-27). This implies that His followers live in two realms: the city of man and the city of God. Each has a claim upon us that must not be denied. The tension that results from this dual citizenship can hardly be avoided without serious repercussions in this world or in the world to come.

We do not know precisely how Jesus would respond to the many church and state battlegrounds of this generation. From the biblical record, we deduce that He would focus on compassionate service to people caught up in the storms of life and on proclaiming with grace the timeless truth of God’s kingdom and righteousness.

For further reflection

1. Much of this WWJD essay argues from the comparative silence of Jesus regarding church and state issues. Can you think of other recorded words or events in the life of Christ that speak more directly to this question?
2. Why did Jesus speak more criticism of spiritual leaders of His day than He did of political leaders like Herod and Caesar?
3. Agree or disagree: Jesus did not exercise the right claimed by most of this world’s citizens — that of criticizing public leaders. Nor would He exercise it in 2006.



Questioning Warfare

Can we fight with earthly armies and still follow standards of the heavenly kingdom?
by Melvin Sweet

Corel Photos

In a brief dialogue with Pilate, the Roman governor, Jesus spoke these memorable words:

“My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now My kingdom is not from here” (John 18:36).

A few hours earlier, Jesus had warned an angry, militant Peter, “Put your sword in its place, for all who take the sword will perish by the sword” (Matthew 26:52).

In these verses, Jesus affirmed that the policies and methods of His kingdom are not those of earthly kingdoms. In this world, nations war against each other; rulers rise and fall by their military strength or lack of it. The kingdom of Jesus Christ, however, does not depend on such physical power. And unlike human kingdoms that rule from

a physical location, His throne exists in the hearts of believers – beyond national borders or territories.

John the Baptist understood this. In preparing the way for Jesus’ ministry (Luke 3:4), he told a group of soldiers, “Do violence to no man, neither accuse any falsely; and be content with your wages” (v. 14, KJV). If the main mission of an army is to conquer and destroy an enemy, how can one “Do violence to no man” and remain a soldier in it?

John’s instructions were consistent with the teachings of Jesus. John preached, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!” Jesus taught the same (Matthew 3:2; 4:17). The message of the angels to the shepherds at Jesus’ birth was “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!” (Luke 2:14).

From the angels’ proclamation

of peace and John’s and Jesus’ teachings, we may infer the obvious differences between Christ’s kingdom and the kingdoms of this world. In earthly kingdoms we hear of “wars and rumors of wars”; but in the kingdom of Jesus Christ, we hear “Love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you” (Matthew 5:44).

How are we to understand these words of our Lord in the twenty-first century? Shall we assume that they do not apply now and that we can participate in military conflicts as any other citizen? Or is there a distinctive standard for citizens of the kingdom of God? To be sure, the life and teachings of Christ erect a different standard than common practice endorses on almost every issue that God’s children face. Instead of doing as every-

body else does, we should follow the biblical motive and pattern for our conduct. Paul wrote:

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ (2 Corinthians 10:3-5).

Coupled with Jesus' teaching, this thought places Christian participation in common warfare into serious question. Humans who trust the arm of flesh — military weaponry — for defense may be forgetting the greater security found in the God of heaven.

Two kingdoms

Under the old covenant, God authorized Moses, Joshua, David, and others to wage carnal warfare against those tribes that had polluted the land of Canaan with their sins. Under the new covenant, however, Jesus has not authorized His followers or any literal nation to conquer earthly territories by the sword. Rather, He calls individuals to obey the gospel and empowers them by the Holy Spirit to win the hearts of people in loving surrender to the Lord — not to invading armies.

Jesus drew the line between heaven and earth, teaching us which set of standards to embrace. For example, He taught us to lay up treasures in heaven and not to focus on earthly possessions that could be plundered by thieves or taken by armies. He instructed His followers to flee Jerusalem when it came under

attack, not to participate in its defense. He predicted persecution of believers and said that some would be put to death, but He offered little or no hint that we should provide self-defense against it.

On the contrary, Jesus stated that if someone takes your coat, let him have your cloak also. If he compels you to go with him one mile, go with him two miles. In the same context, Jesus said, "But I tell you not to resist an evil person. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also" (Matthew 5:39, 41).

Jesus indicated that it is proper to pay taxes ("Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's"), though the government may not always use the revenue honorably. Human governments have a place (Romans 13:1-7); kings and governors are to provide safety for their citizens. However, Paul does not imply that Christians are to be a part of the military system that provides for national security, since to do so would conflict with what Jesus taught.

Where we stand

From the time of the American Civil War, the position of the Church of God (Seventh Day) has been non-participation in military service. When prevailing law did not provide for alterna-

tive duty, members have on occasion chosen time in prison over service in combat. At other times brethren have served in non-combatant roles, usually in medical capacities.

Present law does provide other options for those whose conscience prevents them from being part of a military system. When young men register for the U.S. Selective Service once they turn eighteen, they can pursue alternatives to military service. Inquiries regarding these options may be addressed to the Editor.

Rather than question the personal integrity or Christian character of those who have chosen to serve in the military, our intent here is simply to present the teaching of the New Testament as we understand it. May each disciple of Jesus be led by the Word and Spirit to discern God's will in this matter. **RA**

Melvin and Marybell Sweet serve the congregation in Stanberry, MO, and work with the LITES team based there.



Under the new covenant, Jesus has not authorized His followers or any literal nation to conquer earthly territories by the sword.

by Israel Steinmetz

Be an Ambassador!

As I sat down to write this article, I was planning to say that though it's important to be good citizens in America, it's even more important to be good citizens in the kingdom of God. Then I remembered the BA's "Mailbag" letters I'd seen from places like Mexico and Nigeria, and I got shocked back to reality. *This magazine doesn't go only to Americans, I said to myself. It is also seen and read by Christian youth around the world!*

So now I'm writing for young people in countries that may suffer from choices made by the American people and our government. I'm writing to youth in countries that often live poorly so that we can live well. I'm thinking of the people who work in sweatshops to make our Nike shoes and pick millions of coffee beans so we can throw away six bucks at Starbucks. I'm writing to people whose governments are not democratic, whose national heritage is not Christian, and whose world is so different from mine, it would blow my mind if I saw it firsthand.

This reality check reminded me just how important it is for all of us to seek our citizenship in God's kingdom first and then in the country we live in. It reminded me that for all the good America does in the world, we also do our share of bad. It reminded me that America often chooses a course of action for financial and political reasons, not primarily for religious ones. For instance, we continue trading with nations like China despite its ongoing persecution and murder of Christians.

So what does it mean to value our citizenship in God's kingdom above our citizenship in our respective nations? For starters, we could learn a lot from the Old Testament people of faith. Read what the book of Hebrews says about them:

All these people were still living by faith when they died. . . . And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. . . . they were longing for a better country — a heavenly one (Hebrews 11:13-16).

At the end of the same book we're reminded that "here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come" (13:14). So being a member of God's kingdom means realizing that this world is not our home. We have an eternal home being prepared for us that includes people from every language, tribe, and nation. That's what we're really living for.

Think of your role on this earth as that of a foreign delegate on assignment to a different country. That's how Paul describes it: "We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us" (2 Corinthians 5:20). You are a member of God's kingdom sent on His behalf into hostile territory. The great news is that the kingdom of God goes where you go; it's not confined by geographical or political boundaries.

As you faithfully obey God and are empowered by His Holy Spirit, you take the kingdom of God to the world. So be an ambassador wherever you live, whether it's America, Mexico, Nigeria, France, Canada, India, or Australia. God wants every nation represented in eternity.

Israel Steinmetz is a graduate seminary student living in Chesapeake, VA. Scripture quotations were taken from the *New International Version*.

Disentangling Christ from Commerce



A better plan for saving Christmas? by Charles C. Haynes

www.designpics.com

Because Christmas fell on Sunday last year, some prominent evangelical churches canceled worship services, expecting low attendance. This surprising turn of events might have inspired Christian warriors fighting to “save Christmas” to rethink their strategy. Rather than condemn the “happy holiday” speck in Wal-Mart’s eye, they might have noticed the Yule log in their own.

After all, what was the fight really about? If the aim was to keep “Christ” in the shopping-mall Christmas or to ensure that pagan trees and mistletoe didn’t lose their Christian labels, then it might have made sense to attack presidents and business owners who committed the “happy holi-

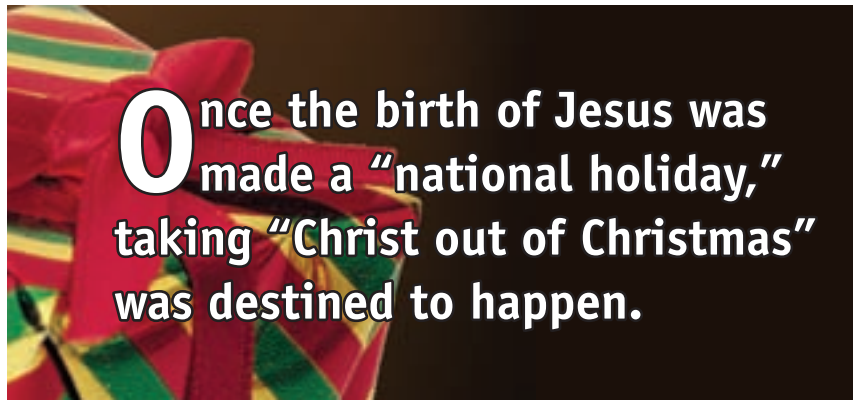
day” sin. But if the goal was to restore the religious meaning of the Christian holy day, then they were aiming at the wrong Target.

The real problem for real Christians is simply this: The sacred Christmas has been consumed by consumerism. With so many expensive do-dads to buy and open, who has time to worship the “reason for the season”? Re-christening the holiday tree won’t solve the December dilemma; it will only make things worse.

For a more effective “save Christmas” battle plan, I decided to consult my old friend, the Puritan minister Roger Williams. After all, Williams was the first Christian in America to raise the alarm about worldly pollution of

the faith. More Puritan than the Puritans, he decried the church leaders and politicians of Massachusetts Bay Colony who polluted the gospel by mixing the sacred and profane. For this and for advocating religious liberty for all, Williams was banished from the colony in 1635.

No word in the English language more angered Williams than *Christendom*. The gospel, he argued, must be in the world but not *of* the world. He was convinced that everything began to go downhill for the church when the emperor Constantine adopted Christianity as the state religion. At that point, Williams wrote, “The Garden of Christ’s Churches turned into the Wilderness of National Religion, and



Once the birth of Jesus was made a “national holiday,” taking “Christ out of Christmas” was destined to happen.

the World into the most unchristian Christendom.”

That, in a nutshell, is the story of Christmas in America. Once the birth of Jesus was made a “national holiday,” taking “Christ out of Christmas” was destined to happen. Today, the secular, commercial “Xmas” so dominates that even some churches must close their doors to accommodate its power. Christmas defenders are left to defend the indefensible: a red-and-green holiday season of unholy materialism.

Even the Puritans who banished Williams foresaw this problem, passing laws to prohibit celebrations of Christmas on December 25. This was an ill-fated attempt to ban from the New World a holiday celebrated in England with drinking and feasting on the unbiblical date originally associated with the Roman festival of Saturnalia.

Roger Williams had a better solution for protecting religion: Build what he described as a “hedge or wall of separation between the garden of the church and the wilderness of the world.” Only by keeping government out of matters of faith, he argued, is it possible for authentic religion to flourish. To test his conviction, he founded Rhode Island — the

first society in the New World without an established church and with full religious freedom for everyone.

Rhode Island’s “lively experiment” eventually became America’s commitment to “no establishment” under the First Amendment. Freeing religion from entanglement with the state is our nation’s great gift to people of all faiths — and to world civilization. With all the confusion and conflict today over the meaning of *separation*, Americans too easily forget that the wall metaphor was invented by a deeply religious man committed to guarding religion from being co-opted by the state and corrupted by the world.

The First Amendment may keep government from promoting the religious Christmas, but it doesn’t prevent the culture from appropriating Christmas for secular or economic ends. That’s why a Roger Williams Campaign to Save Christmas might start by asking folks to write thank-you notes to all politicians who say “happy holidays” and every store that puts up a “holiday tree.” Let them have the holiday, Williams would argue; just don’t call it Christmas. Let them keep the pagan tree and jingle bells. Throw in Santa Claus and the elves. But

leave the crèche and carols out of it. Don’t mix Christ with commerce.

If persuasion doesn’t work, Roger Williams might make a more outrageous proposal (one even more likely to be ignored): Return December 25 to the pagans, and find another date to celebrate Christ’s birth (some biblical scholars think the Nativity took place in the spring). Just imagine: Without all the presents to wrap, trees to decorate, and parties to attend, believing Christians could spend the Advent season actually preparing for the birth of Jesus. Without the distraction of blinking lights and mistletoe, there will be plenty of time and money to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and visit the sick and imprisoned.

Save Christmas? If Jerry Falwell and other self-appointed defenders of Christmas are serious about putting the Christ back in Christmas, then Roger Williams has a better plan. But if the Friend or Foe Christmas Campaign is really about politics and power, then Christendom it is.

“Christenings make not Christians,” said Williams. And neither does making Wal-Mart say, “Merry Christmas.” **BA**

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I walk on crystal,
the sky is rich in silver.

Beyond that pine
a moonstone glows.

Content, I walk alone,
collecting beauty —

God-given and free.

No age will find me destitute.

Carmen F. Hicks

What's new with . . .

SWORD

- Retreat at Sis-Q Meadows, OR, July 19-23

Spring Vale Academy

- Fall enrollment
August 20-21

Publications

- Light for Life tracts — perfect for outreach: *Out of the Closet* and *When the Bottom Falls Out*. Order through BAP.

North American Women's Ministries

- National Hispanic Women's Retreat in Mesa, AZ, September 1-4

Ministries Training System

- Regional classrooms resume shortly; visit www.mts.cog7.org



Missions Abroad

Bill Hicks, Director

Did You Save Change for Your World?

Each July, Missions Abroad asks for a special offering to help with a vital world mission project. Because of the growth of our global church, we are asking members in the United States and Canada to save their pocket change throughout the year and give it to missions.

This offering provides needed funds for the day-to-day operations of our International Ministerial Congress (IMC) by coordinating mission efforts around the world. It provides for Church leaders to visit distant lands to coordinate the Church's evangelistic work.

This year we will also help IMC delegates from many nations to attend the congress in Mexico City November 12-18. At this important meeting, Church leaders will worship and plan together to reach the world with the good news of Jesus Christ, the soon-coming King.

God accomplishes wonderful things with your offerings: Brethren all over the globe are encouraged and enabled to serve. *You* can help bring Change for Your World through this annual offering sponsored by the General Conference Missions Ministries. (If you forgot the change, paper money is OK, too!) For more information, contact Missions@cog7.org.





Contented Singles in Jasper

Eighteen singles from seven states retreated to the hilly, green backdrop of northwest Arkansas May 5-7. Attendees, who ranged in age from early 20s to past 70, discussed the theme of contentment. Music was performed and led by Harmony Hill from Ft. Smith, Arkansas, and the local church in Jasper provided its support. Another singles retreat is planned for the spring of '07.



Prayer Breakfast in OKC

Oklahoma Lieutenant Governor Mary Fallin is flanked by Geraldine Burlison and Betty St. Clair at a recent prayer breakfast sponsored by the Oklahoma City CoG7 in Del City. One purpose of the breakfast was to bring closer relationship between city government; first responders (police, fire, and others); and churches of the community. Betty St. Clair's husband, Ennis, served both as chief of police and city councilman in Del City and as an elder of the OKC church prior to his death in 2005. Ms. Fallin spoke at the prayer breakfast.



Bright LITES in Stanberry

These young adults will complete a successful year with the LITES team on July 15. Front (L-R): Tim Howell, Vivian Huerta, Caleb Cortez; back (L-R): Philip Leach, Andrew Fernandez, Tim Steinhauser, Caleb Noble. The next year of LITES begins September 11; applications are due by August 1. For information or to apply, visit the LITES Web site (<http://lites.cog7.org/>) or contact LITES Ministries, P.O. Box 172, Stanberry, MO 64489; 660-783-9544 or lites@cog7.org.

Gift Planning for the Gospel

Did you know that tax incentives can permit us to give more to the Lord's work? It's true! U.S. tax laws make it possible to reduce or eliminate taxes when giving large assets like stocks, bonds, or real properties that have increased in value for more than one year.

To learn more about major gifts, contact the Office of Planned Giving, P.O. Box 33677, Denver, CO 80233. Phone: 303-452-7973; fax: 303-452-0657; e-mail: plannedgiving@cog7.org.

Fragile Vase

You are invited to the nineteenth annual Hispanic Women's Retreat at the Hilton Mesa Hotel in Mesa, Arizona, September 1-4. The theme is "Fragile Vase." Mothers are invited to bring daughters over age 13. For more information, please call Dora Cruz (602-434-3902), Alejandra Ramirez (202-812-0284), or Sylvia Corral (209-869-0777).

Manuel Solis
1910-2006

Read a full tribute to Elder Solis on page 31.



Elder Denis Burrell, CoG7 pastor and enthusiastic evangelist for 32 years, died on

May 11 at age 55. A graduate of Spring Vale Academy ('67) and Midwest Bible College ('71), Denis served the last 20 years as pastor in his hometown of Fairview, Oklahoma. He also served effectively as a prison chaplain for the Oklahoma Department of Corrections. His mother (Vera Burrell), brother (Ivan Burrell), sister

(Linda Rich), wife (Donna Burrell), six children (Titus, Talitha, Anna, Abraham, Christian, and Matthew), and two grandchildren are among the many family, brethren, and friends who mourn his passing.



Saints Behind the Scenes

by Heber Vega

Not long ago, I visited the Conroe, Texas, church, which meets in a community called Cut 'n Shoot, a few miles away. (No kidding about that name. The Conroe church borrowed the nearby city's name, for obvious reasons: "Cut n' Shoot CoG7"?)



Anyway, the Conroe church hosted an unforgettable youth conference.

Maybe you've heard reports, but I want to tell you something you probably haven't heard — about the ant-like platoon of people joyfully serving in the background. Today let's turn the spotlight on the unrecognized — those who don't often make it into photos or published reports.

From the guest preacher's perspective, I want to publicly thank . . .

- my San Diego brethren for allowing their pastor to be absent once a month serving others. Knowing the time it will require, you approve my travel agenda and rejoice with me when I return to report God's awesome work elsewhere.
- members of the organizing and inviting committee. You showered this event with months of planning and prayer, and it showed.
- youth sponsors and chaperones who drove to bring 400+ from other churches. Your part in this ministry is vital, and it pays off.
- the hosting family who made me feel at home. I enjoyed every minute with "you all" that weekend. Other families hosted youth overnight also — angels hosting angels.
- the hosting church. You've done this before, and you are good. Turning your facilities over to 450 youth was brave and unselfish. Your pastor's quiet service in many details was a plain, walking sermon to us all.
- every church member who showed up and served. You provided tons of excellent free food and beverage, seasoned with love.
- those who supplied the money required. You could have applied it to your building project, but you invested it in youth instead.
- those who cleaned and put everything back together again after we left.

The list could go on. Your Christ-like service reminded me that many others before you had invested love, prayer, money, and hard work before this could happen in any church. Now you're passing the blessing on in ways you may never know.

God's Spirit is at work in all His people in congregations, camps, retreats, and conferences this summer. On behalf of those often up front, I thank all of you who make such events possible. Since we can't list all your names when we report, we want you to know that when it reads "Guest Speaker: —," we hear the echo of an army of saints behind the scenes serving in the Church of God (Seventh Day).

Still Glowing . . . After 25 years

by Lorraine Carr

Ministries come in surprising ways, and you may not recognize them as such until you look back. Here's an example.

One idea had its beginning in 1980 when Donna Faubion, my mother, fell on her sixty-seventh birthday and broke her hip. Many cards and letters came from old friends she had lost touch with, and they brought much joy. It seemed a shame to her that others couldn't also stay in touch regularly and share the fun.



With a promise of support from the Women's Agency, *Afterglow*, a newsletter for seniors, was born. It was dedicated to the idea that these dear men and women with their thoughts and contributions will not be forgotten but remembered and cherished for life.

After a rocky start, Mother's lifelong friend, Eileen Adams Lambert, moved nearby to help with the project. Eileen and Mother had both edited Church publications and enjoyed writing. Combined with the computer skills of Linda Armstrong, their experience saw *Afterglow* through to success. Other ladies of our Conroe, Texas, church (and a few men) volunteered to help with mailing. *Afterglow* became their project too.

Though many of the original volunteers have passed away, *Afterglow* continues its simple message of friendship and cheer. Editorial duties are shared by Verna McCoy, Dorothy Nimchuk, and me. To our amazement, God has blessed this effort, and we delight to say, "You don't have to be old to read *Afterglow*." In the hands of our readers young and old, this little paper has become a tool for ministry as copies are passed on to friends (often from other denominations), who in turn may be blest and subscribe.

With well over a thousand mailed each month, *Afterglow* now reaches behind prison walls and into foreign countries. We are humbled and grateful that God uses this small effort, for which no one has

ever been paid, to help meet needs for an easily overlooked group!

Afterglow is available upon request, without cost or obligation. For a sample copy or to subscribe, send your name and address to *Afterglow*, 101 S. Ridgeway, Conroe, TX 77301.



Spiritual Refreshment

More than 170 women from the U.S. and Canada attended the National Women's Retreat in Springfield, Missouri, April 14-16. Our singing times were refreshing, with scenic vistas on the screen. We heard educational and timely messages concerning mind, body, and spirit from Bertha Upchurch of Houston, Texas; Elizabeth Keim of Kansas City, Missouri; Jeddie Larry of Statesville, North Carolina; and our keynote speaker Dr. Clarence Duff of Brampton, Ontario.

The retreat banquet on Saturday night was followed by a talent and skit program.

We were not designed to be miserable and unhappy; we need spiritual association with our Maker and with others. "The LORD is my strength and my shield; my heart trusted in Him, and I am helped; therefore my heart greatly rejoices, and with my song I will praise Him" (Psalm 28:7).

— Georgine Raver

No Free Lunch? Try Free Camps

July 7-9 - Iowa Family Camp near Cedar Rapids; food, lodging, bedding-towels provided for all; 319-668-9663; jharvey@idtdna.com; www.campiodiseca.org/

July 28-30 - Central District Super Weekend at Prairie Bible Camp, Lehr, ND; no charge; 701-685-2612; bmka@drtel.net

Mission to Chiapas

In April a medical missions team traveled to Chiapas state in Southeastern Mexico for a week of service. The team of 30 included a medical doctor, several dentists, nurses, and other medical/dental technicians and assistants from both the U.S. and Mexico. They provided free treatment to hundreds of patients in two different Chiapas locations:

San Cristobal de Las Casas and Pantehlo. Among the 880+ dental and medical patients seen was a young girl with congenital cancer in one eye and another with a club foot and deformed fingers. Both need operations, which are being arranged with funds contributed for this purpose.

“Praise and honor to the Almighty for a successful missionary trip to Chiapas, Mexico. The experience was overwhelming, as was the spiritual love from everyone in every site we encountered. The Lord’s Supper service with hundreds of members there was an experience that words can’t describe – truly unforgettable.”

– Irma Cazarez-Diaz, Houston, TX



The Chiapas medical/dental missionary team at the Church of God (Seventh Day) in San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas. Some 700 brethren worship in this church each week.

Alethea Brown, of New York, handles some of the paperwork.

G. C. Awards at SVA

Hannah Chesney of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, and Jared Ciavarella of Mitchell, South Dakota, received awards for Academic Excellence and for Spiritual Leadership, respectively, at the Spring Vale Academy Commencement on May 28. These awards are given each year by the General Conference as a way of expressing the permanent association between the Owosso, Michigan, school and the Church it serves.

Coming Up

July 29, September 30, December 30 - Super Sabbaths in Phoenix and Mesa, AZ

August 21 - fall semester begins, Spring Vale Academy; Owosso, MI; contact Patrick Siddens at SVAFinance@chartermi.net or 989-725-2391

August 25-30 - Sis-Q Meadows Senior Adult Retreat, Cave Junction, OR; contact Dale Lawson at marioncg7@juno.com or Ken Lawson at krsnlawson@aol.com



MTS in NYC

Elder Robert Coulter (left) and the New York City classroom of Ministries Training System in the Morris Avenue (Bronx) church on April 9. Elder Coulter was teaching the history of the Church of God (Seventh Day).

National FYC

Kurt Lang, Director

The countdown is on. The summer camp you've looked forward to is just around the corner. MISSION POSSIBLE is on the map again — Jasper, Arkansas, to be exact.

And then you blink. Camp is over; so is summer. School has started, and those carefree days you looked forward to a few months back have disappeared. What will you have to show for them?

What we do now has the power to alter our eternal experience (2 Corinthians 4:16-18). The everyday things we do this July and August can achieve an eternal glory for us in the Father's kingdom. We are the ones who decide if our words and actions will make a positive or a negative impact — forever.

So what are you doing with your summer? Will you simply exist, or really live? Will you allow yourself to be God's tool? Will your summer hold lasting memories, or will it be fun times and then boredom again? Will these weeks be a waste of time, or will they bless you and others for years to come? Will you help a friend, a neighbor, your family draw closer to Jesus?

Summer is in full swing; fall quickly approaches. Live now so you'll have no regrets then. Don't let your camp experience fall by the wayside, but use each day to full purpose wherever you are. And if you need a reminder about how this awesome summer turns out, check out camp pictures at <http://fyc.cog7.org>!



October 21 (suggested) - NFYC Fall Challenge, packets available at fyc.cog7.org; contact Kurt and Kristi Lang, NFYC directors, at 541-517-1079 or nfyc@cog7.org



2005 Gimme Five Awards

Congratulations to the winners of the 2005 Gimme Five program.

High Five For the Top Five — the most active, balanced programs or most improvement:

El Paso, Texas, city-wide youth ministry
Harrisburg, Oregon

Jacob Solis Community Award — a traveling plaque for the group demonstrating excellence in service to others:

Harrisburg, Oregon

We encourage all groups to use Gimme Five for a balanced, healthy youth ministry based on the five purposes of the Church. It's not too late for 2006. Program packets are available and group activities may be viewed at <http://home.cog7.org/ministries/nfyc/youthworker/Gimme5>.

International Tour

Nigeria

The Church of God (Seventh Day) was founded in Nigeria by Benjamin I. Tikili in the 1930s. As a colporteur for the Seventh-day Adventist Church, he found a copy of the *Bible Advocate* magazine. Its contents so impressed him that he wrote to the General Conference office in the United States to learn more. He agreed with the study tracts that were sent and became a member of the Church of God.

Elder Tikili planted a church near the city of Aba, Rivers State, and a building was dedicated in 1939. A primary school was soon established, followed by other congregations. In 1954 Elder Charles Adams and his family went to Nigeria to evangelize and teach in the school. They stayed several months until Sister Adams became ill and had to return to the U.S.

Following the Adams' service, the Church's missions department visited Nigeria occasionally until civil war broke out (1967-70), making travel impossible. All Church schools in Nigeria were then expropriated by the government. Following the war, missions assistance to the Nigerian Church was resumed.

Nigeria is referred to as the "giant" of Africa because of its rich resources in both human popula-

tion and minerals (i.e., oil). The civil war still affects the country in many ways, and the present peace is an uneasy one. Church development was mostly confined to a state-by-state and even tribal basis, rather than a national one. For many decades, assistance from America was largely limited to literature, and the economic engine that drove the work was mostly Nigerian.

It is no easy task to compile facts and figures on the current status of CoG7 in Nigeria. This conference is probably the largest in our International Ministerial Congress (IMC), and it is growing where things are difficult, to say the least.

Recently, the IMC began encouraging development of a national Church administration for this nation that claims over 100,000 baptized members and 450-500 congregations in state and regional conferences. In 2003 the leadership of these groups met in Port Harcourt with IMC president Ramon Ruiz Garza, G. C. missions director Bill Hicks, and leaders of other

Sabbatarian groups with interest in national cooperation. The culmination of this meeting was the dedication of the first Nigerian CoG7 board of directors, with Pastor Jonah Emmanuel as the national overseer and Elder Kingdom E. Isirima as secretary.

Progress continues slowly but steadily, despite national tensions that are intensified by rampant corruption, identity theft, confidence schemes, embezzlement, and other problems. The growing religious conflict between Muslims and Christians in some regions also affects this process. The wealth and economic power is in the "Christian" Southeast, where many of our churches exist. Northern and western regions are heavily Muslim with less economic resources, presenting a national dilemma. The paradox is that in this land of economic and political extremes, the gospel of Christ flourishes.

Please remember your many brethren in Nigeria. Pray for their leadership and protection as they reach out to one another in the harvest. This encouraging e-mail was recently received from their national overseer: "Beloved in Christ, be informed that the national conference of the Churches of God (Seventh Day) Nigeria is healthy and progressing by the special grace of God."

— Elders Robert Coulter
and Bill Hicks,
G. C. Missions Director





A Life Well Lived

Weddings and funerals can provide new and surprising details about people we've known for many years. That happened recently at the funeral of our church's oldest minister, Manuel Martinez Solis, of San Antonio, Texas.

Born in Mexico in 1910, Manuel migrated to the United States with his parents at the age of four. He met his beloved wife, Carmen (who preceded him in death in 2000), while working in the Texas cotton fields; and they were married in 1929. To this union God gave ten children, 50 grandchildren, 120 great-grandchildren, 66 great-great grandchildren, and several great-great-greats! Brother Solis lived to see six generations and died at the ripe old age of 95.

Standing beside ten fresh graves, Job found enough grace in his heart to declare: "The LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD" (Job 1:21, KJV). Manuel Solis' full and fruitful life points more to what God has given than what He has now taken. Consider the good gifts the Lord gave us through Brother Solis.

A godly man. David's portrait of the godly man in Psalm 1 depicts abhorrence of ungodliness, delight in God's Word, fruitfulness, and integrity — a fitting description of Brother Solis.

A gentle man. So gentle was his manner, so quiet his way, that some took him for granted until he passed away. Brother Solis had few requirements, rarely made demands. Thus, he lived among us not just a man, but a gentle man.

A family man. Deeply committed to family values, he loved his family, and they dearly loved him. The tears and fond affections expressed during Brother Solis' funeral verify this close bond.

A churchman. Manuel Solis pastored churches in San Antonio and McAllen, Texas, and in Albuquerque, New Mexico. He loved the Church, dedi-

cated himself to its service, and prayed for its unity. In recognition of faithful service, Brother Solis received the Churchmanship Award at the 2001 General Conference Convention.

A disciplined man. By the testimony of his family, he was a careful spender and always lived within his means. If a man is rich not by what he has but by what he can live without, Manuel Solis was a rich man indeed. He was as careful with his stomach as he was with his wallet. His family recalls his wise counsel in this regard: Respect the stomach, or it will reveal itself.

A ready man. Years ago Brother Solis purchased his funeral plan. Then he gave instructions concerning his funeral service and even set aside funds to pay for the meal afterward. Despite pain from his cancer, he mustered the strength to attend Lord's Supper celebration on April 11, then went home and died just a few days later.

Indeed, the Lord gave us much in the life of Manuel Solis. I was honored to represent the Church at this man's funeral and was humbled by the experience. It prompted me to reflect on the meaning of life and ministry, not just to my church but to my family as well. If the Lord tarries, we will all lie in the grave someday. Above us will be a tombstone, and a dash between the two dates will summarize all of life. It matters not how much we own but how we live and love — how we spend our dash.

I thank God for Manuel Solis' life. The prayer of Vance Havner now takes on new meaning for me: "God of the years that are left to me, you be the Lord of what's left."

— *Whaid Guscott Rose*
General Conference President

Sis-Q Meadows

2006

Sis-Q Meadows,
a CoG7 camp near
Cave Junction, Oregon

Summertime means
camp time. And youth
camp means fun, friends,
and faith for a lifetime.

Check out dates and details
on youth or family camps
in Arkansas, California,
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New York, North Carolina,
North Dakota, Oregon. Visit
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**“Remember now your
Creator in the days of
your youth . . .”
(Ecclesiastes 12:1).**



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