

## GOD AND COUNTRY

In the eighties, the propaganda wing of the Soviet government came into possession of a Hollywood film from the 1940's entitled "Grapes of Wrath." The movie was based on a novel by John Steinbeck about migrant farm laborers during the depression who fled the great dust storms in Oklahoma and Kansas and drove their jalopies out to California, where they were exploited by fruit farmers who exacted heavy labor out of them for sub-poverty wages. The Soviets thought this would make powerful propaganda points with the people of the Soviet Union by showing them the evils of American capitalism. That is until they realized that it might be embarrassing when people watching the movie found out that even the lowliest and most poverty-stricken Americans owned automobiles back in the 30's, while the vast majority of the people in the Soviet Union still couldn't afford them. The movie was quickly filed away in the KGB archives.

Although we are not without our problems, we Americans *have* been richly blessed. God has given us a pleasant climate, abundant natural resources and fertile soil. He has endowed us with a political system that guarantees our essential freedoms and, on balance, does a pretty good job of balancing individual liberties with the common good. He has given us an economic system which produces a staggering amount of wealth. Although America comprises only 6.6% of the world's land mass, and 5% of the world's population, it produces 30% of the world's goods and services. Along with great wealth, God has given us a heart for those who live in poverty. We can argue—and we do—about what constitutes a fair distribution of wealth in our society, but the fact remains that the poor in America are rich by comparison with the poor in the rest of the world. And, God has aroused in the hearts of Americans a willingness to confront problems like racism and work toward solutions, as evidenced by our willingness to fight a bloody civil war in order to eradicate slavery. As far as cultural achievements go, America has produced 42% of all the Nobel Prize winners who have ever lived. So, yes, America is richly blessed—both in its material prosperity AND in the character of its people.

God showered His blessings on ancient Israel too. He led the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt amidst great signs and arranged for them to plunder much of Egypt's wealth. He fed, clothed and guided them through a vast wilderness. He gave them a perfect set of laws to govern themselves combined with a form of worship through which their sins would be forgiven. Finally he delivered them into a land of milk and honey where they prospered Like America, ancient Israel was richly blessed.

But God warned the Israelites that rich blessings give rise to a lethal temptation: the temptation to begin thinking that the blessings are products of our own labors rather than gifts from God. Before the Israelites entered the land God had promised them, Moses warned them: *"When you have eaten and are satisfied, praise the Lord your God for the good land he has given you....Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, then your heart will become proud and you will forget the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt....You may say to*

*yourself, 'My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.'* ”  
Does that sound familiar?

It is a clear sign of our sinful natures that during times of prosperity we tend to forget that all our possessions—not only our houses and clothes and cars and jobs, but our very bodies and souls and talents and faith—are all gifts from God. And when we forget that all we have and are are gifts from God, it is not long before we begin to ignore the Giver of the gifts. In our minds, God recedes from our thoughts and becomes a remote, passive God, who just watches “from a distance.” Then, finally, he vanishes and becomes no God at all.

The Puritans who founded this country worshipped the God of the Bible and set aside fifty-two Sundays and several religious holidays each year to publicly thank Him for all his blessings. The Deists who wrote our *Declaration of Independence* and *Constitution*, including Thomas Paine, Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin, mostly remained silent about God. If they referred to Him at all, it was as some kind of divine “clockmaker” who created the universe, wound it up, walked away from it, and let it run on its own. Today, most politicians have little if anything to say about God. At best, God has been marginalized; at worst, he has been assigned the status of a myth or fairy tale.

All this was envisioned over two hundred years ago by a man who came to be known as the father of Lutheranism in America: a man by the name of Henry Melchior Muhlenberg who emigrated here from Germany in 1742 and established the first Lutheran churches in America. After Americans revolted against British rule and won independence Muhlenberg wrote the following words, which now seem prophetic: “*Now one can, of course, reasonably conclude from this success that it was the will of the Supreme Ruler of heaven and earth that there should be independence and not otherwise. But whether this was God’s active or passive will, His gracious or his permissive will, only the future will show, depending upon whether men use independence well or abuse it. The pity is that too many do not understand the word “independence,” and do not want to understand it, because they think that now they are also independent of the Savior of the world and His laws....*” Sadly, for many people in America today, that is exactly what “independence” means. Having come to believe that God’s blessings are their own accomplishments, they see little need for a Savior. What would he save them from? We have all that we need, and we have produced it with our own hands! We needn’t be hostile to religion; we can simply be indifferent to it.

What our country needs—and this is a very un-Lutheran word—is revival. A revival of repentance over the raging immorality and decadence which permeates our culture and a revival of faith in a Savior who can deliver us from our sins.

For some Christians, the way to make this happen is to get believers into positions of power and influence. To work toward electing a Christianized government where Christian values drive legislative, judicial and executive decisions. Not exactly a theocracy, where the government imposes a particular religion upon the citizenry, but a government filled with political leaders who act on Christian principles.

As attractive of an idea as this may be to us, we must firmly reject it. Jesus’ response to the idea of setting up a Christian political kingdom on earth is unequivocal: “*Render unto*

*Caesar what is Caesar's and unto God what is God's*" You see, as soon as Jesus began to attract a following during his ministry here on earth, some of his disciples began to entertain notions of making Him King. They hoped he would help them throw off the yoke of Roman rule and establish His kingdom in its place. The very last thing they asked him before he ascended into heaven was: "*Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?*" Jesus rejected such notions, admonishing them to leave the governing of the kingdom of this world to worldly leaders and focus their efforts on advancing the kingdom of God in the hearts of men. The great commission was not to reform earthly governments, but to preach the Gospel to all nations. "*The kingdom of God,*" Jesus told His disciples, "*does not come with your careful observation, nor will people say 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is within you.*" In other words, the kingdom of God is not a kingdom where rulers govern through laws and ordinances, but a kingdom where grace reigns in human hearts.

To put it plainly: keep 'em separate! Luther explained it this way: there is a left-handed kingdom of God in which God rules the world through government, parents, teachers and other civil authorities, and there is a right-handed kingdom of God in which He reigns in human hearts through the church and its message of the Gospel. God has placed left-handed kingdom authorities in their positions so that they can maintain an orderly society, and he does this so that the Gospel of the right handed kingdom can be proclaimed to all nations. Caesar has his work to do and we have ours, and we must be careful not to confuse the two because bad things happen when we do. History shows us very clearly that when the church tries to govern the social order, as it did during the middle ages, social progress is arrested and decay sets in. On the other hand, when the government takes on the role of being the dispenser of charity, as is increasingly happening in Europe and America, people begin to trust government rather than God to keep them safe and make them happy. And, as Luther said, whoever or whatever you trust the most to keep you safe and make you happy is your God—and that will either be God Himself, or it will be an idol. It is best when each kingdom sticks to the work God has given it to do.

It is important for Christians to remember that they are subject to the authorities of the left handed kingdom. In spirit, the Christian's citizenship is in heaven, but in the flesh, he is subject to the law of the land in which he lives. The Bible is clear about our obligation to pay taxes and to respect and honor the governing authorities. Only when the governing authorities command us to break God's laws do we have the right to refuse to obey them. Then, of course, it's simply a matter of counting the cost and finding the courage to stand fast. May it please God that you and I never have to face that test, but God give us strength if we do.

And so there is God and there is country. God, of course, rules all things, since he is Lord of heaven and earth. But He rules us through two different kingdoms—or maybe it's more accurate to say that he *blesses* us through two different kingdoms. Certainly in America we are literally awash with God's blessings. And it is our *privilege* and our *honor* and our *duty* as Christians to do all that we can to help our fellow citizens understand that these blessings all come from one source, and that source is not Uncle Sam or General Electric or the AFL/CIO: it is God Almighty, the ruler of heaven and earth, to Whom we can only say: Praise the Lord! Amen.

**Isaiah 45:18-22**

For this is what the LORD says— he who created the heavens, he is God; he who fashioned and made the earth, he founded it; he did not create it to be empty, but formed it to be inhabited— he says: “I am the LORD, and there is no other. I have not spoken in secret, from somewhere in a land of darkness; I have not said to Jacob’s descendants, ‘Seek me in vain.’ I, the LORD, speak the truth; I declare what is right. “Gather together and come; assemble, you fugitives from the nations. Ignorant are those who carry about idols of wood, who pray to gods that cannot save. Declare what is to be, present it— let them take counsel together. Who foretold this long ago, who declared it from the distant past? Was it not I, the LORD? And there is no God apart from me, a righteous God and a Savior; there is none but me. “Turn to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other.

**Psalm 15**

LORD, who may dwell in your sacred tent? Who may live on your holy mountain? The one whose walk is blameless, who does what is righteous, who speaks the truth from their heart; whose tongue utters no slander, who does no wrong to a neighbor, and casts no slur on others; who despises a vile person but honors those who fear the LORD; who keeps an oath even when it hurts, and does not change their mind; who lends money to the poor without interest; who does not accept a bribe against the innocent. Whoever does these things will never be shaken.

**2 Timothy 4:1-4**

In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths.

**John 14:1-6**

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. My Father’s house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going. “Thomas said to him, “Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?” Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.