

GOD AND COUNTRY

Back in the eighties, 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 about the evils of American capitalism.

That is until they realized that it might be embarrassing when Russians watching the movie found out that even poverty-stricken Americans back in the 1930's owned automobiles while the vast majority of Russians still couldn't afford them.

The movie was quickly filed away in the KGB archives.

We Americans *have* been richly blessed.

God has given us a pleasant climate, abundant natural resources and fertile farmland.

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 the poor.

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 to do away with 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.

A long time ago there was another country that was richly blessed by God.

That country was ancient Israel.

God had led the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt amidst great signs and wonders and arranged for them to take much of Egypt's wealth with them.

He fed, clothed and guided them as they traveled through the wilderness.

He gave them a perfect set of laws to govern themselves along with a form of worship through which their sins would be forgiven when they failed to follow those laws.

Finally he delivered them into a land of milk and honey.

Like America, ancient Israel was richly blessed.

But God warned the Israelites that riches give rise to a lethal temptation: the temptation to begin thinking that His blessings were products of their 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?

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 we start worshipping the gifts instead of the Giver.

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 were devout Christians who 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.

Later, however, the men who wrote our *Declaration of Independence* and *Constitution*, men like Thomas Paine, Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin, did not consider themselves Christians but “deists.”

Deists did not worship the God of the Bible but a God they imagined as a divine “clockmaker” who created the universe, wound it up, walked away from it, and let it run on its own.

In our day the leaders of our nation 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.

Muhlenberg was a German pastor emigrated to America in 1742 and established the first Lutheran church in this country.

After America won her independence from England Muhlenberg wrote the following words, which now

seem prophetic: *“...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?

What our country needs is revival.

A revival of repentance over the increasing immorality and decadence that is beginning to permeate our culture and a revival of faith in a Savior who alone 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"*

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 goal of the great commission was not to reform secular society but to save souls from sin and hell through the preaching of the Gospel.

“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 regulations, 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 in peace 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 authority 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 do something which is against 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.

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 ourselves, it is God Almighty, the ruler of heaven and earth, to Whom we can only say: Praise the Lord! Amen.

FATHER IN HEAVEN, LOOK DOWN UPON OUR LAND
AND BLESS OUR PEOPLE WITH A SPIRIT OF
REPENTANCE AND WITH GREAT FAITH. REVIVE US,
LORD, AND HELP US TO KNOW AND TO BELIEVE THAT
YOU **ARE** THE SOURCE OF ALL OUR BLESSINGS, AND
THAT APART FROM YOU WE CAN DO NOTHING.
HUMBLE US LORD WITH YOUR RIGHTEOUS ANGER
AND RESTORE US WITH YOUR GRACIOUS LOVE.