

IMAGES OF THE CHURCH: GOD'S NEW NATION "This Is My Country" Philippians 3:20; Ephesians 2:19

TAKE A FIRST LOOK.

I. NEVER FORGET THIS SCENE, IN THE EVENTS THAT FOLLOWED JESUS' ARREST:

^{NIV} **John 18:33-38a:** *Pilate then went back inside the palace, summoned Jesus and asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?"³⁴ "Is that your own idea," Jesus asked, "or did others talk to you about me?"³⁵ "Am I a Jew?" Pilate replied. "It was your people and your chief priests who handed you over to me. What is it you have done?"³⁶ Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place."³⁷ "You are a king, then!" said Pilate. Jesus answered, "You are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me."³⁸ "What is truth?"*

II. JESUS CLAIMED, "My kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36). That is still His perspective.

III. THAT MEANS THAT YOU AND I, IF EACH OF US HAS SUBMITTED TO THE KINGSHIP OF JESUS, ARE CITIZENS OF TWO COUNTRIES. Chuck Colson argued that the church is a group of "resident aliens" and says that this is a reality "that we always are in every society."¹ We will always be in a tension between the claims of the King of kings, and Lord of Lords, and the changing ethics and values of our human culture.

I—Consider this point of view by a present government official and try to guess who offered it. He presented these comments at a prayer breakfast for students at the Mississippi College School of Law, a Baptist school in Jackson, Mississippi, back in the mid-1990s: "Devout Christians are destined to be regarded as fools in modern society.... We are fools for Christ's sake. We must pray for courage to endure the scorn of the sophisticated world." This person went on to say that intellectuals through history have rejected miracles and the Easter story. With obvious irony, this person said, "The wise do not investigate such silliness." They "do not believe." Though this person said it is "irrational" to reject miracles. "One can be sophisticated and believe in God. Reason and intellect are not to be laid aside where matters of religion are concerned." After the speech, the audience of 600 gave a standing ovation.

Did you guess who said all of this? It was Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia, a Roman Catholic believer.²

V. I APPLAUD JUDGE SCALIA MYSELF, BECAUSE HE RIGHTLY SAW NO CONTRADICTION BETWEEN LIVING UNDER THE AUTHORITY OF JESUS AND LIVING FULLY IN THIS PRESENT CULTURE. He admitted what we must also admit. There may often be a contradiction between the ethics and values of the kingdom of God and those of our earthly culture. I have learned this even more from my recent readings in Christian history. Confusing the Church with the political Nation has had some grave consequences (but more of this later, Lord willing).

VI. As followers of Jesus Christ, we are *citizens of a new country*, a heavenly one. This makes all the difference in how we live in our earthly society. Let's review two passages in Paul's writings that make this clear.

¹ *Christianity Today*, October 7, 1996, p. 41.

² From *USA Today*, April 10, 1996, via Bible Illustrator.

TAKE A CLOSER LOOK AT GOD'S NEW NATION, BEGINNING WITH PHILIPPIANS 3:17-21.

I. THE CHURCH IS THE VISIBLE EXPRESSION OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD. "Our citizenship is in heaven" (Philippians 3:20).

1. Paul warns that people whose minds are only "on earthly things" are destined for destruction (Phil. 3:18-19). This has to do with the continual focus of the mind, the orientation of our entire way of thinking, not the appropriate attention that we must give to things that matter in this life.

A—We must come to terms with the temporary nature of most of our present experience and remember that we are destined for eternity in a "new heaven and earth" (see Revelation 21).

I—C. S. Lewis reminded his readers and listeners in *Mere Christianity* that the saying, "That man is so heavenly minded he is no earthly good" has been proven wrong throughout history.

"Hope," Lewis said, "is one of the Theological virtues. This means that a continual looking forward to the eternal world is not (as some modern people think) a form of escapism or wishful thinking, but one of the things a Christian is meant to do. It does not mean that we are to leave the present world as it is. If you read history, you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next. The Apostles themselves, who set on foot the conversion of the Roman Empire, the great men who built up the Middle Ages, the English Evangelicals who abolished the Slave Trade [including my personal hero, William Wilberforce], all left their mark on Earth, precisely because their minds were occupied with Heaven. It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this. Aim at Heaven and you will get earth 'thrown in': aim at earth and you will get neither."³ I commend his discussion to your reading and reflection. The real truth, as usual, is just the opposite of our common saying. We can become so earthly minded that we are no use for the purposes of heaven—or earth.

2. He calls us to trust steadfastly and wait for the salvation of the Lord Jesus Christ, who has the power to bring all things under His control at the proper time (Phil. 3:21). This is a simple extension of Christian hope. If our hope is secure and firm, then we must learn to wait steadfastly for the fulfillment of that hope.

A—This is why we must pray as though the problems of our culture can only be solved by the intervention of God—because this is true!

I—The temptation to self-made salvation goes back a long way. Consider the situation when Isaiah was prophet in Israel and hear his stern words of reproof to a hard-hearted people.

^{NIV} **Isaiah 30:1-2:** "Woe to the obstinate children," declares the LORD, "to those who carry out plans that are not mine, forming an alliance, but not by my Spirit, heaping sin upon sin;² who go down to Egypt without consulting me; who look for help to Pharaoh's protection, to Egypt's shade for refuge."

Isaiah rebukes the people for making alliances without consulting the will of God. They felt that when push came to shove, it was better to be aligned with Egypt than it was to be aligned with the living God. Big mistake.

And they seemed to have a strong sense of the "separation of Church and state," as we would put it nowadays:

³ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Macmillan, 1952), p. 104, my emphasis.

NIV Isaiah 30:10-11: *They say to the seers, “See no more visions!” and to the prophets, “Give us no more visions of what is right! Tell us pleasant things, prophesy illusions. ¹¹ Leave this way, get off this path, and stop confronting us with the Holy One of Israel!”*

And then, one of the saddest sentences in the Prophets:

NIV Isaiah 30:15: *This is what the Sovereign LORD, the Holy One of Israel, says: “In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength, but you would have none of it.”*

And then, this final reproof:

NIV Isaiah 31:1: *Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help, who rely on horses, who trust in the multitude of their chariots and in the great strength of their horsemen, but do not look to the Holy One of Israel, or seek help from the LORD.*

This is especially apropos for a nation like modern America that has the most superior military force in the world. Just as ancient Israel could not ultimately trust in their alliance with Egypt—their horses, the multitude of their chariots or the strength of their horsemen—neither can America draw her ultimate power from her allies, her smart bombs, the multitude of her tanks, fighter jets, and trained soldiers. If the living God, the “Holy One of Israel,” “the LORD/Yahweh,” is not the ultimate Source of our strength of character and spiritual life, we will not be able to save ourselves.

I—Dorothy Sayers was a close friend of C. S. Lewis, along with her husband George. Dorothy was an able writer and thinker in her own right. She wrote, “It is precisely because of the eternity outside time that everything in time becomes valuable and important and meaningful. Therefore, Christianity ... makes it of urgent importance that everything we do here (whether individually or as a society) should be rightly related to what we eternally are. ‘Eternal life’ is the sole sanction for the values of this life.”⁴

II. THE CHURCH PROVIDES PERMANENT CITIZENSHIP FOR MEMBERS OF EVERY NATION. Ephesians 2:11-19

1. *Paul reminds his readers that before they met Jesus Christ, they were “excluded from citizenship” (v. 12).* This is one of the bad elements of the “before” picture of Christian conversion. Without Jesus Christ, the only national connection we have is the nation of our birth. For each of us, this connection dies when we die.

2. *He also reminds them that Jesus has brought together people who otherwise would be bitterly separated (vv. 14-18).*

a. Jesus Himself is our bridge both to God and to each other (v. 14).

A—Our service for Christ should not be just to peddle our own brand; it is to honor and represent Him.
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I—Several years ago, some of my pastor-friends and myself were reading a thoughtful but simple book written by a man who was later shown to be living a double life of sexual immorality. That was very unfortunate, because I and my fellow pastors gained some simple and valuable insights from his book. The book was a call to present Jesus Christ to the community where the churches are located, and to say every good thing that we can about the other churches in their area. The general practice that the author advocated and which the church of which he was pastor

⁴ Dorothy L. Sayers in *Dorothy L. Sayers: her Life and Soul. Christianity Today*, Vol. 41, no. 11.

tried to perform was this: when you are speaking publicly, speak about Jesus Christ. When you are “in house,” interpret the faith in all the flavor of your particular denomination or approach.

This is a simple application of what Paul practiced. “*For we do not preach ourselves,*” he wrote, “*but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake*” (2 Corinthians 4:5, NIV). “We do not preach ourselves.” This means that what we say to the community is *not* things like this:

“We are the friendliest church in town.”

“We have the best youth group in the area.”

“We have the most comfortable seating.”

“We have the best pipe organ.”

“We have the best pastor, or music leaders, or collegiate ministry.”

“We have the *right* position on the COVID pandemic.”

In our case, several years ago before our building expansion project, we could have said: “We have the hottest chapel for Sunday evening services, therefore increasing the self-loathing associated with true humility.” Now, we have lost this great incentive for attendance. :)

Paul says, “We do not preach *ourselves*.” All these things (above) would be about *us*.

Instead, we preach Jesus Christ as Lord. He is the King over the eternal kingdom. He is the ultimate President or Prime Minister whose position does not depend upon a vote of the people.

b. Jesus accomplished this bridge-building work through the cross (vv. 15-16). This is at the heart of Christian proclamation. This is the heart of the Good News. Jesus has done for the world what no one in the world can do for himself/herself. He has purchased the salvation of God by dying innocently in the place of the guilty. We can receive this great salvation by opening our lives to Him and letting His blood cleanse us from all our sin.

c. Jesus has opened one road that leads surely to God; it is Jesus Himself and His Spirit (vv. 17-18).

A—Have we entered this new country by faith in Jesus Christ?

I—I watched a bit of an interesting discussion (or was that a polite argument?) between Bill O’Reilly and a professor from a university in California several years ago about the flood of illegal immigrants that even now still keeps pouring through the southern border of the United States. Both agreed (imagine that!) that the plight of the people who try to cross the deserts of the south seeking passage into the United States is terrible. The professor advocated finding “a better way” to bring these “workers” into the country so that this wasn’t necessary. O’Reilly argued that we needed to call out the National Guard to enforce the restrictions that are in place for immigration, so that no one would try to cross the desert to enter the country illegally. In other words, he advocated that we simply apply the immigration methods for these folk seeking a better life that we apply to everyone else from everywhere else. These fellows had a civil conversation, but they didn’t agree on everything (especially the part about the National Guard).

The question is a big one, but it set me to thinking about this topic. We cannot enter the kingdom of God in any way but in the way that God has established. “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me,” said Jesus (John 14:6). This is a fundamental truth of the Christian faith. There is only one border into the kingdom of God, with only one gate. That gate is Jesus Christ Himself.

3. Now, on this side of the new life found in Jesus Christ, all Christians share citizenship in God’s eternal kingdom (v. 19).

A—This is why concerned Christians now should work to cultivate Biblical reconciliation between Christians across denominational and racial lines.

I—I read several years ago about the Reformation in Europe and Great Britain in a Christian History course (Spring, 2010). I was both encouraged and discouraged by the reading. I was encouraged to see how God brought the people into renewed life in Christ when they rediscovered the Scriptures and began to read them, often for the first time in the original Hebrew (OT) and Greek (NT) and then in their own heart-languages: German, English and more. Many who read the Scriptures for themselves found new life in Christ and the courage to stand against the established powers of the time. What discouraged me is this. Many of those same people—Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, and John Calvin (among others)—persecuted other professing Christians in much the same way they had been persecuted by the Roman Catholic powers of the time. The early Anabaptists (not exactly the forebears of present Baptists, but an *influence*) were persecuted by everyone, it seemed: Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Reformed of various stripes—all saw these “Radical Reformers” (with “radical” meaning “going back to the root”) as heretics. They treated them as we might be tempted to treat terrorists. And many of them were model citizens in the manner in which they lived. One little factoid that *Christian History* magazine carried about them was this: “A 16th century man who did not drink to excess, curse, or abuse his workmen or family *could be suspected of being an Anabaptist* and thus persecuted.”⁵ Now that is a very unfortunate observation from the perspective of God and the eternal kingdom of Christ. These practices should be evident for all the followers of Jesus Christ and should commend His kingship to the watching world. One of the unfortunate elements of the Reformation and its ensuing history is that every branch that came from that period of history in the 16th and 17th centuries thought that it was the very trunk of the tree and that all others had nothing to do with them. In other words, they all thought that they alone possessed the true Christian faith and that all others who disagreed with them—over the meaning of the Lord’s Supper, about who should or should not be baptized and in what manner, about whether a Christian should serve in the military, and on and on—were not truly God’s people in Christ. We must fight this lingering error. Yes, there are those who are truly heretics, who deny cardinal doctrines about God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—and who don’t accept the Scriptures’ witness to Jesus Christ as the only Savior. Others might be in error, but they are not truly heretics, if they differ on some lessor point.

TAKE IT HOME.

I. We must affirm our central unity in Christ with all true believers.

II. We must practice our temporary citizenship with the ethics and values of our permanent citizenship.

I—Alice Gray tells that Mother Theresa attended a gathering with kings and presidents and statesmen from all over the world. They were in their crowns and jewels and silks and Mother Theresa wore her sari held together by a safety pin.

One of the noblemen spoke to her of her work with the poorest of the poor in Calcutta. He asked her if she didn’t become discouraged because she saw so few successes in her ministry. Mother Theresa answered, “No, I do not become discouraged. You see, God has not called me to a ministry of success. He has called me to a ministry of mercy.”⁶

III. We must remember what is lasting and what is not. Nations are temporary; people are eternal. Our greatest act of citizenship is to lead people, one by one, to know their true and rightful King, the Lord Jesus Christ.

⁵ “The Anabaptists: Did You Know?” from *Christian History* magazine, Issue 5: Radical Reformation: the Anabaptists. My emphasis.

⁶ *Stories for the Heart*, p. 107.