



July 3, 2016  
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## *Fearless Q: Are We 'One Nation Under God'?*

I Peter 2: 11-17

We continue with our sermon series "Fearless Q" in which we are tackling the toughest questions you could throw at us. On this Fourth of July weekend, we turn to a pile of questions that deal with a similar theme. "How has the Supreme Court's ruling on marriage weakened the family and defied God?" "How do we give a fair, loving but Christian response that will win the culture and our children back?" "This nation was formed "under God! What can we, as Christians, do about getting our nation back to God?" We can summarize these questions this way: "Are we 'one nation under God?'"

I'd like to start my message with a quiz. This concept of "one nation under God," as we find it in our Pledge of Allegiance... what provided the inspiration for that idea? You have four choices. The phrase "one nation under God" was inspired by words from: A) The Declaration of Independence; B) The Federalist Papers; C) The Bill of Rights; D) A sermon preached by a friend of Pastor Mark. Okay, let's vote.

The answer: D) A sermon preached by a friend of Pastor Mark. When I went to St. Andrews in 1985, I met a retired Scottish minister named George Docherty. He took me under his wing and became a mentor to me for two years. But before George retired to St. Andrews, he was the minister at New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in Washington D.C., also known as "Lincoln's Church."

On February 7, 1954, in the midst of the Communist Scare, President Dwight Eisenhower was sitting in Abraham Lincoln's pew when George preached a sermon titled, "Under God." In it, he argued that the words "under God" ought to be added to the Pledge of Allegiance, because the existing pledge, as he put it, "...could be the pledge of any country. I could hear little Moscovites repeat a similar pledge to their hammer-and-sickle flag with equal solemnity..." The next day, Eisenhower's friends in congress started the ball rolling, and on Flag Day, June 14, 1954, the president signed a bill adding the words, "under God" to the Pledge of Allegiance.

Remember, this was at the outset of the Cold War; there was a strong move to differentiate the United States from atheistic Russia. And the leaders of our nation on both sides of the aisle were eager to declare that we were, indeed, "one nation under God." But now, sixty years later, many are wondering, is this still true?

First, a few personal thoughts: I'm proud to be an American. I am proud to live in a land where idiots can rant in the middle of the public square about how horrible

America is without getting beheaded. I'm proud that we have repeatedly sacrificed young lives and resources in the global battle against tyrannical evil, most notably in two horrific world wars. There is plenty for us to repent of as a nation: slavery and a horrific civil war and incursions into world affairs where we did not belong. But on the whole, our nation has been a force for great good over its 240-year history.

And despite what you read in the press, many of the world's citizens agree. One of the proofs of a nation's greatness is the gate test: throw open the gates of your nation's borders and watch which way the people run—out or in? I visited East Berlin in 1985 when the wall was still in place. I watched as East German workmen repaired Checkpoint Charlie with guards standing on the yellow line, that separated the two halves of the city, with their guns pointed at the workmen to keep them from running to freedom! With all that is wrong about our nation, the continued verdict of millions of would-be immigrants is this: given a chance, they would love to live in this country.

With that as a backdrop then, I return to our question: Are we one nation under God or maybe are we "still" one nation under God. And if we aren't, what can we do to get it back? In one sense I would say, "Of course we are a nation under God." If God is truly sovereign, then of course we are a nation under Him. So is Turkey, so is Iraq, so is Syria... so is Russia! Psalm 24.1 declares, "The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it..." Every nation on this earth is a nation under God, whether they acknowledge it or not!

But this phrase meant something more to those who first wrote it. It meant that we were a nation that acknowledged we were under God—that credited our prosperity and freedom to God's special blessing. Some even spoke of the United States as the New Jerusalem—a place of refuge and opportunity. And for millions that has been so.

But something has happened in the last sixty years, hasn't it: lawsuits to remove "under God" from the Pledge of Allegiance; efforts to remove "In God we trust" from our currency; a court battle to remove the Ten Commandments from federal buildings; abortion on demand, marriage redefined, gender undefined. Whatever way we were a "nation under God" sixty years ago, that is slipping away, isn't it? So what do we do? How do we live as believers in a culture that is increasingly indifferent and even antagonistic towards our faith?

Well first century Christians certainly understood something about this. And Peter addressed these issues in his letter to believers who had been scattered throughout the empire because of persecution. I Peter 2: 11-17:

<sup>11</sup>Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. <sup>12</sup>Keep your conduct among the

Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.

<sup>13</sup>Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, <sup>14</sup>or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. <sup>15</sup>For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. <sup>16</sup>Live as free men, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. <sup>17</sup>Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor.

How do we cope with a nation that seems every day to reject the very God upon whose principles we were established? First of all, we remember that we are refugees! In verse 1, Peter calls his readers "sojourners and exiles." The idea in the original Greek is this: foreign refugees. We watch news accounts of hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees fleeing for their lives. Some of us respond with pity, others with fear or suspicion, but few of us respond with this thought: "I'm just like them!" Why? Because we are citizens, we have a country. And because we are citizens, when our country seems to be shifting or drifting it frightens us.

But Peter puts this in perspective. We are not, first of all, citizens of the United States or any other country. When we were adopted into God's family through Jesus, we became citizens of heaven. So there is a sense in which we are refugees in our own land... we don't belong here, not ultimately. Because we belong to Jesus, because his Spirit lives within us, we long for a home that is a true reflection of the holiness of God where poverty and immorality and violence and greed are no more.

But that is not here—not on this earth, not even in this great land. We long to think of America as Jerusalem, but really, it is more like Babylon. Do you understand what I mean by that? Jerusalem was the holy city of the Jews, but when they disobeyed the Lord, he allowed his people to be carried off to exile in Babylon. Babylon was a beautiful city. The Jews lived comfortably there but it was still exile, it was not their home. As lovely as it can be in Babylon, we are refugees in exile, longing for our heavenly home. So it should not surprise us that the habits and instincts and idolatries of this culture are foreign and disturbing to us.

If you think this is Jerusalem, you will be disappointed. In fact, your patriotism can even lead you to idolatry. I know those who would call themselves Christians whose love of country and the flag far exceeds their love of Christ, his cross and his Church. That is idolatry! But if you realize that this beautiful land is, nevertheless, Babylon a temporary place of exile, it helps put everything in proper perspective.

So then, how do we live as refugees in Babylon? First, we live honorably. <sup>12</sup>"Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God..." Where have we heard this before? The Sermon on the Mount! Jesus told us to be light and salt in

the world—that we were to let our light shine in such a way that everyone, even our enemies, would notice and give glory to God because of it. That’s what Peter is saying! We often pray, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth...” One way we redeem a chunk of Babylon is to live light, salty lives of gentle insurrection—lives that undermine the decaying, hopeless, pointless moral structure around us.

Do you want ours to be “one nation under God?” Then start by being “one person under God.” You cannot speak for the nation, but you can speak for yourself. If you want a nation that is moral, generous, compassionate and just, make sure you are that kind of person. There is nothing more destructive to the witness of Christ than those who preach one thing and live an entirely different way. If you protest the removal of prayer from the schools but don’t pray with your children at home, if you protest the redefinition of marriage but dishonor your wedding bed or break your marriage vows, if you protest the removal of the Ten Commandments from public buildings but covet and lie and dishonor your parents... you only add fuel to the fire of those who find religion irrelevant and even evil. If you want to be a nation under God, you be a person under God. Live honorably.

And live free. In verse 16, Peter admonishes his readers to “live as free men.” Many of his readers were not free at all—they were slaves. And his letter was addressed to those who were fleeing persecution. Yet Peter offers this remarkable challenge: Live free! If you belong to Jesus Christ, you have been set free! Live like it!

I wonder how many of us are living in freedom. We feel the morality of our culture drifting. We look at our political leaders with equal doses of contempt and disgust. We believe that the future of our nation depends upon one judicial appointment. And all these things bind us up in anxiety. We may say that we are the land of the free and the home of the brave, but we American Christians speak and think and live and pray more like helpless victims.

Want to set this in perspective? Let’s return to the last three words of our text: “Honor the emperor.” Do you know who the emperor was at that time? Nero. He was one of the most bloodthirsty, crazy men ever to sit on the Roman throne. Under Nero, Christians were strung up on poles, doused with tar, and set on fire to light the streets. They were wrapped in animal skins and torn apart by wild beasts for sport. Under Nero, both Paul and Peter were executed.

If you find our politicians egotistical, corrupt, or megalomaniacal, this text ought to set it all in perspective. Those Christians had real reason to be afraid of their culture. Still, Peter could say, “Live free” because in the end, even Nero was a pawn in God’s hands.

I don’t think many of us are living free. We are bound in fear, anxiety and even the idolatry of believing that, if only we could elect the right person, everything would be made right. We would get our nation back again. Let me tell you this: no matter

who is sitting in the Oval Office January 20, 2017, Jesus Christ will still be sitting upon his throne in heaven. And if the Son has set you free, you will be free indeed!

Does this mean that we ought not to exercise our rights and responsibilities as citizens? Absolutely not! Jesus paid his taxes. Paul exercised his right to appear before Caesar. I am proud when I see our members engaged in our political process, running for office, seeking signatures, caravanning to Olympia for a prayer rally. Christians ought to be good citizens, and it is shameful that something like 19 million evangelical Christians did not register or vote in recent presidential elections, but in the end we relax in the fact that Jesus Christ is Lord.

Live honorably; live free. And finally, this: Be prepared. I draw this from 3:15: "...always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you..." If you live lives of conspicuous honor, but are not prepared to explain that it is the Holy Spirit who cleansed and changed you, your witness is wasted. If you live free from the anxiety of those around you, but are not prepared to give the credit to Jesus whom you know to be sovereign over all things, your witness is wasted. If all your friends see is that you are trying hard to be a good, stoic person who behaves properly and remains calm in the midst of tumult, they will never understand that the only way this nation will ever turn around—if it turns around—is through revival. And only Jesus can bring revival.

And by the way, revival usually comes through persecution, not prosperity. We American Christians are arrogant to think that we will be spared persecution! Just ask the Chinese Church which, by the way, is exploding!

Flying back from General Assembly two weeks ago, I witness the funniest thing. A woman went up to the bathroom and began tugging on the cockpit door. When it wouldn't open, she pulled harder and pounded on it. Her husband shouted, "To the left, to the left!" She started pulling harder to the left! Finally, the flight attendant rushed up and pointed her to the bathroom door and probably saved her from a very unsettling encounter with air marshals. She was desperate for relief, and didn't know where to find it.

This nation is desperate for relief, and we are knocking on all the wrong doors. If we are ever going to become a "nation under God," and that is a big "if", it will be because disciples of Jesus Christ live honorably, live free and courageously point those who are desperate for relief to the only one who can provide it—our sovereign, all-powerful, gracious Lord Jesus Christ. To his name be honor and glory both now and forever more. Amen.