

27 January 2019

A Christian Nation?

Amos 7:10-17

In the tenth century before Christ, the nation of Israel that had been unified by King David split into two. Ten of the twelve tribes formed the nation of Israel, in the north, while the tribes of Judah and Simeon formed the nation of Judah, in the south. The two nations were occasionally at war but more often were allies. After all, they shared a common heritage in their memories of the Exodus and the law of God that had been given them by Moses. The nation of Israel (with ten tribes and most of the land) was by far the most powerful and prosperous, especially in the 8th century BCE, during the long reign of King Jeroboam II.

But then, as now, great wealth for some meant oppression and poverty for others, and during Jeroboam's reign a man from the Southern Kingdom named Amos traveled to Israel and began proclaiming the judgment of God on them. Amos's message was simple: Israel had turned away from the Law of Moses, especially from those laws that commanded care for the poor and helpless. Amos condemned deceptive banking practices, superficial religiosity, and ostentatious displays of wealth while others had nothing to eat. He was angry, abrasive, often crude, and always uncompromising. He was also right, all of which provoked a response.

We read Amos chapter 7, verses 10-17.

¹⁰Then Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, sent to King Jeroboam of Israel, saying, 'Amos has conspired against you in the very center of the house of Israel; the land is not able to bear all his words. ¹¹For thus Amos has said,

*"Jeroboam shall die by the sword,
and Israel must go into exile away from his land." '*

¹²And Amaziah said to Amos, 'O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, earn your bread there, and prophesy there; ¹³but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king's sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom.'

¹⁴Then Amos answered Amaziah, 'I am no prophet, nor a prophet's son; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees, ¹⁵and the Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, "Go, prophesy to my people Israel."

*¹⁶ 'Now therefore hear the word of the Lord.
You say, "Do not prophesy against Israel,
and do not preach against the house of Isaac."*

*¹⁷ Therefore, thus says the Lord:
"Your wife shall become a prostitute in the city,
and your sons and your daughters shall fall by the sword,
and your land shall be parceled out by line;
you yourself shall die in an unclean land,
and Israel shall surely go into exile away from its land." '*

The southern kingdom of Judah had one temple, in Jerusalem, but the northern kingdom had two – one in the far north, at Dan, and one in the far south, at Bethel. This Amaziah was apparently the head priest at Bethel, and he summoned this Judean preacher, Amos, to tell him to cut it out. But notice the reason that he gives. Here's Amos calling for people to turn back to the Law of

God, but Amaziah doesn't argue with him on the interpretation of the law. Indeed, he ignores everything that Amos has been preaching and says only, "Go away. This is the king's sanctuary. This is a temple of the kingdom."

Apparently to Amaziah, the problem with Amos wasn't that he was wrong, but that he was disruptive. The shrine at Bethel was supported by the king – including, no doubt, Amaziah's own pay – and Amaziah was not going to jeopardize that relationship by permitting this nuisance to criticize the king. So he sent a letter to King Jeroboam, warning him about this outside agitator, then called him in to get rid of him. The temple had a solid, symbiotic relationship with the government, and Amos and the Law of God were inconvenient.

In my current sermon series, I'm trying to refresh our memory of the distinctive, defining features of Christianity. In religious surveys, some 70% of Americans still claim to be "Christian," but do all of us "Christians" mean the same thing by that word? If it doesn't have an intrinsic meaning – if "Christian" is whatever each person says it is – then it's not a particularly useful term. So what we're doing this month is examining several different forms that Almost-Christianity can take, varieties of religious practice that may be admirable and even claim to be Christian but that simply are not. Today I want to talk about American Civil Religion.

"Civil religion is what happens when a religious tradition blends so thoroughly with cultural and national identity that it becomes impossible to separate the two. In a civil religion, being religious is seen as a civic duty, and supporting your nation is a religious task. In the United States of America, the majority faith has always been Christianity, so American Civil Religion is a hybrid between some aspects of Christianity and various features of American culture and patriotism. In this religion, for instance, the Bible and the Stars and Stripes are equal objects of veneration (both being used exclusively for display purposes), the United States is seen as having a special and preferred status in the heart of God, and America's economic system – free market capitalism – is assumed without question to be God's chosen plan. Now American Civil Religion can be admirable. It tends to be big-hearted and generous, supports charitable work, and fosters community. It's as wholesome as a small town Fourth of July parade. Basically, the strengths of American Civil Religion are all the things we like about the Mayberry of the Andy Griffith Show. None of that is bad; much of it is necessary.

But the problem with any civil religion is that when faith becomes entwined with nation and culture, faith always loses. When the distinctives of a faith come into conflict with the distinctives of a culture, it is never the culture that compromises. The faith becomes handmaiden to the culture, not the other way around. Let me illustrate that by looking at the last nationwide surge in American Civil Religion, the 1950s. Everything came together at that time to foster religious-ness. The GIs returning from World War II got married, went to college on the GI Bill, became middle-class, joined the Rotary and Lions Clubs, had kids – a *lot* of kids – and took those kids to church. As a percentage of population, church attendance in the 1950s was double what it had been even thirty years before. Being a Christian was almost your patriotic duty, because we stood against "godless Communism." During these years, Christianity began getting special favors and recognition from the US government. It was in the 50s when "In God We Trust" was put on our money and "under God" added to our Pledge of Allegiance. Clergy were granted special tax advantages, just because we were clergy. (I still have those tax advantages, and they save me some money. They're probably unconstitutional.) And within this boom of church influence, we Methodists were ground zero – the largest and most wide-spread Protestant church in America. It was in the 50s that we built the Methodist Building in Washington D.C. at the center of federal power. Look out one window of our building, and there's an unobstructed view

of the US Capitol; look out another and you get an equally direct line of sight to the Supreme Court. We were powerful, we were influential, and we didn't care who knew it.

But a church pays a price for this sort of political and cultural influence, and it's the price that Amaziah, priest of Bethel, paid. Amos came to him calling for people to return to God, to remember God's commands to care for the helpless, but Amaziah didn't hear him. All he heard was a threat to the status quo by an outside agitator. Sound familiar? That's exactly how American Civil Religion responded to Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Civil Rights Movement. Like Amos, Dr. King rose up to challenge the status quo, calling for Americans to remember the principles of equality that our nation had claimed from the beginning, calling on Christians to remember what Jesus said "love your neighbor" meant. Like Amos, Dr. King met resistance at every turn. Not just from Klansmen with their burning crosses, but also from good Christian pastors and church people saying, "Slow down! Slow down!" and calling for a more gradual change that wouldn't compromise their comfort and influence. The White American Church, by and large, may have seen Dr. King's point, but they were also his greatest obstacle, because they didn't want society to change. They had too much to lose. You could say that Amos got off easy. He just got run out of town.

Now, to be fair, Methodists have a better record in the Civil Rights Movement than some churches. There were at least *some* Methodists who heard the voice of the prophet and responded. But those voices were not many, and not very loud, and often silenced by their own churches. That's what civil religion does – it gives religious people a vested interest in the status quo and deadens their ears to the words of the prophets.

Today, the most striking feature of American society is how divided we are, and in this new reality, I would suggest that the old American Civil Religion of the 50s is past, and that we now have two different options. There's Progressive Civil Religion, in which liberal mainline Protestant churches are assimilated wholly into the Democratic party, and there's Conservative Civil Religion, in which evangelical churches become little more than mouthpieces for the Republicans. But both expressions of American Civil Religion – Progressive and Conservative – are insidious and will rot genuine faith from the inside out. There is no government or political party that represents Christ. Only we can do that.

So I close today with a few questions for you to ask yourselves, questions that may help you sort out for yourself how much of your faith has been compromised by civil religion.

1. If you were to move to a new city and have to find a new church, what would you look for first? Would it be depth of faith and opportunities for growth and service, or would it be a shared political viewpoint? Would you look for people who pray like you, or people who vote like you? The sociologist of religion Robert Putnam says that more and more people are choosing their church by the church's politics.
2. When a leader from the political party that you favor does something wrong, something that you acknowledge is sinful and unworthy of a leader, do you call for Christian forgiveness and restoration? And do you respond the same way when it is a leader from the *other* party?
3. When our nation is at war, and we pray for the safety of our troops, does it ever occur to us to pray for the safety of those fighting on the other side? Or do we assume that God cares first for our troops?

I am proud of my country and recognize that I am inexpressibly fortunate to live in this great nation. I hope you feel the same. But we do not worship our nation, and we must not allow our

faith to merge with national patriotism or party politics. We've done it in the past, and the temptation is strong to do it still, but that's not Christianity. Not even, really, almost.

A final word. Walter Brueggemann is one of the great American biblical scholars of the last century. He is also a man of deep and thoughtful faith – you may remember seeing his name in the bulletin sometimes when I've borrowed from a book of his prayers. I close today with a quotation from Dr. Brueggemann: "The crisis in the U.S. church has almost nothing to do with being liberal or conservative; it has everything to do with giving up on the faith and discipline of Christian baptism and settling for a common, generic U.S. identity that is part patriotism, part consumerism, part violence, and part affluence."