

We also must remember that our role is essential. I think one of the reasons that the owner became so annoyed with the fig tree is that it had become useless. If it was not going to bear fruit it would be better for it not to take up space. When the church forgets its role then we can become useless. W.A. Visser Hooft reminds us that the two great church groups of history have become extinct. The first was the church of North Africa. The second was the Nestorian Church of Central Asia. Both were once great forces for Christianity but now both are extinct. Visser Hooft writes it was a result of egocentric institutionalism, lack of a sense of evangelism and the unwillingness to be led by the Holy Spirit.

Paul Duke's great sermon Sparred contains the warning for the church in America as he writes "here is our sin: it is the raw unthinkable violation of our purpose here. Like the fig tree we've been set down on a sunny slope of the garden and we absorb so many rich resources as we hold to our privilege place."²

Is it too late for the church in America? Have we forgotten our purpose? Have we lost our voice? Have we forgotten that it is our role and not the governments to be the light of the world and the spiritual guide of the culture?

The parable reminds us there is still time. There is another chance for those who will repent and begin to be what they were planted to be. The fig tree would be given another chance. It is by God's grace that God still wants to use us, even when we have failed. But let us not forget that all though there is still time, that time does run out. It is as Tony Campolo says that we should use hour glasses instead of watches, because they remind us that time does run out. We need to become aware of the urgency that is the story of the fig tree. The urgent matter is this; the church must again be the church.

The question is not is America a Christian nation, the question is whether the church of Jesus Christ in America is willing to be the church? It is not too late.

¹Karl Menninger What Ever Happened to Sin (New York: Hawthorn, 1973) p. 13.

²Paul Duke "Sparred" Southern Baptist Preaching Today (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1987) p. 83.



Trinity Baptist Church • 4815 Six Forks Road
Raleigh, NC 27609 • 919.787.3740



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Summer Short Stories

Is It Too Late?

Dr. Jeff Roberts

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Is the United States of America a Christian nation? Is that even a question we should ask? Is it a question we can answer? Before we can answer it we have to determine what we mean by "Christian." Do we mean that the laws of the United States should favor the Christian religion over other religions which are practiced in our nation? If so, then what form of Christianity should be the state affirmed religion? Should it be Baptists, Presbyterianism, Anglicanism, Catholicism or maybe not a denomination as much as a theology. Which theology should be the norm? Should it be five point Calvinism or free-will Armenism? When we say that America is a Christian nation what do we mean?

Some would say that the founding fathers intended a Christian nation. That the values of freedom, personal responsibility, the pursuit of happiness and the freedom to speak and practice religion are influenced by the Christian ethic, so America is a Christian nation. It is true that although we would not want Ben Franklin or Thomas Jefferson as our pastor, serving as a deacon or teaching Sunday School to our children, as deist they did have at the very least an appreciation for the practice of Christianity, even if it was more academic than personal. Other founding fathers like Adams and so many others were clergymen who lived their lives devoted to the gospel, as well as to the American enterprise. To believe that Christianity had nothing to do with the founding of America is to re-write history and deny the faith of so many of our founding fathers. Many of them did believe they were doing God's work.

At the same time, to suggest that America is a Christian nation and that Christianity was the sole reason for the founding of our nation is

also a re-writing of history. There were many issues that led to the Declaration of Independence and the practice of religion was not at the top of the list. In fact, in many states where the independence fervor was the greatest people like Baptists were constantly being harassed and persecuted. When we say that America is a Christian nation we are not speaking about a state sponsored religion. The freedom to practice faith or not practice faith is one of the great freedoms we celebrate today. Baptists have a history of celebrating this freedom and standing not only for the majority who practice faith, but also defending the faithless. Why? Because Baptists have long maintained that faith cannot be legislated or forced. Faith is something that happens in the heart and the conscience and is only authentic when it is chosen by the individual under the guidance and conviction of the Holy Spirit.

I say all this today because our short story parable of Jesus is a political parable. It is a parable about who is responsible for the kingdom of God in a culture. The question of whether our government should be Christian is really not the right question. The question is not whether the United States of America is going to be a Christian nation. The question is whether the church in the United States of America is going to be the church?

The parable we are looking at today is one that is about national fervor and responsibility. The setting is a political setting. There were some present who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood was mixed with their sacrifices by Pilate. There were those who came to Jesus and said have you heard what Pilate did? Pilate killed Galileans when they came to worship. While they were at worship Pilate had them killed. We do not have any historical evidence of this incident described in Luke, but there is no reason to

doubt the event because it is well within the realm of the political nature of Pilate and the Galileans. Pilate was known for his ruthless paranoia and was always seeking to put down perceived revolutions. Galilee was known for its revolutionary nature. Galilee was a hotbed for zealots and revolutionary discussion against Rome and Pilate was always ready for a response. So, it is not surprising for Jesus to hear the Pilate, the government, had killed Galilean Jews, God's people, while they were worshipping. Those who told Jesus of this event were not simply trying to inform Jesus, but trying to get a response and this information put Jesus in a dilemma. Here was Jesus' predicament, if he sided with Pilate and said that he acted appropriately then of course he was a traitor to his own people. If he sided with the government against God's people then he would look as someone who was not willing to stand against evil in the government. However, if he sided with the Galileans against his government then as a Galilean himself he would have been identified as a revolutionary, which of course was the charge that was brought against him during his crucifixion trial. What is Jesus' response? It is not to comment on the role of the government, but to comment on the spiritual nature of the people of Israel. He says that the sin of the Galileans was no greater than others and in fact, if they did not repent of their sins then they too would perish.

Jesus then tells his parable of the fig tree that would not produce fruit. A man planted a fig tree in his garden but it did not bear fruit. After three years, ample time to produce fruit, the owner decided that the tree was simply taking up space and needed to cut down. But the caretaker requested another chance for the tree. Admitting that the tree was failing, the caretaker suggests to the owner to give the tree one more year to bear fruit. If it does not bear fruit next year, then I will cut it down.

The fig tree represents Israel which God planted in his garden. The image of the fig tree and the garden of God is found throughout the Old Testament. Yet, Israel was not bearing fruit. Israel was not doing what it was to do as a nation. A fig tree bears figs and Israel was to be God's people in this world and neither was being true to their nature. The owner who represents God in the parable has had enough, but the vinedresser who represents Jesus becomes Israel's last chance. God shows mercy through his son Jesus to withhold judgment from Israel. They are given another chance. However, if Israel refuses to be who they are called to be, then their time will run out on mercy and judgment would come.

Here is what I want us to notice about this parable. On this day we think about our dual citizenship in the United States of America and the Kingdom of God.

Jesus when faced with this political question does not suggest that it is the role of his government to bring about the fruit of the Kingdom, but instead reminds his listeners that it is the people of God who will determine the spiritual nature of their culture. This is Jesus' example throughout his ministry. When asked about taxes, Jesus said give Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God. When the Apostle Paul spoke of the Christian Citizen in Rome, Paul who was arrested by Roman officials would encourage the Christians to honor those in authority and to live quiet and peaceful lives trying to convert others by their actions. They were to be the very aroma of Christ wherever they found themselves.

Is that what Jesus is telling us in this parable? Is Jesus saying the problem is not Rome, but rather it is Israel? The problem is not Pilate it is the religious leaders of Jesus' day. It is God's people and not the government that will make the difference in the spiritual nature of a culture.

If this is the case, then our question about America being a Christian nation is really the wrong question. Our question is instead one of an introspective nature. What about our sin, our role, and our influence in our nation as Christians? That is really what is at issue. If that is the case, then what can we do as Christians and as the church in our culture? What is our role?

First, we must hold our leaders accountable. That is the prophetic role we have in our nation. The church must remind the culture what is right and what is wrong. We must find ourselves like Nathan who dared to shake his finger in King David's face and accuse him of his sinful acts. We must be like Jeremiah and not tell the King just what he wants to hear, but to point out the sin of the nation and the need of repentance.

In his book on the parables, Dr. Peter Rhea Jones speaks of the need for Christians to call to account all those who are involved in acts which are immoral and detrimental to our nation, regardless of the political party. According to Jones, the Watergate Scandal that involved breaking and entering and burglary was not viewed as a sin, but simply "stupid." When President Clinton was involved in an extra-marital affair it was called unfortunate and personal. To which Dr. Jones quotes Dr. Karl Menninger's writing when he asked the question, what ever happened to sin?

Menninger writes:

Is no one any longer guilty of anything? Guilty perhaps of a sin that could be repented and repaired or atoned for? Is it only that someone may be stupid or sick or criminal-or asleep? Wrong things are being done, we know; tares are being sown in the wheat field at night. But is no one responsible, no one answerable for these acts? Anxiety and

depression we all acknowledge, and even vague guilt feelings; but has no one committed any sins.¹

The church must begin to hold our leaders accountable, not just for mistakes or misjudgments, but more importantly for sin. In recent years there have been enough scandals of all types to remind us of the sin of leadership. As the church we are called to call sin...sin regardless of whether it is committed by a republican, democrat or independent. The church must be the prophet of the culture.

We must not only hold our leaders accountable, but more importantly we must be accountable to God. The church has a unique role. The parable is the reminder that the fig tree was not bearing fruit. God's people were not being God's people. The church must hold itself accountable.

One of the things that occurred in our culture politically is Christians and church denominations have become more committed to a political party than to Christ. There are good meaning passionate Christians on both extremes of theological issues, who have become convinced that the political party that supports their view on the issue are the most passionate about must also be right on every issue. Thus, the church has become a political pawn in our ever widening cultural divide. The part of the church that describes itself as progressive and liberal are committed to the Democratic Party, no matter what their platform might be and how that measures against Biblical teaching. Those who describe themselves as conservative find themselves committed to the Republican Party, regardless if certain parts of their platform might be in contradiction to the ways and teachings of Jesus.

If the church is going to be the church in our culture, then it must not ever sell itself completely too any political party, however it always must maintain the independence to be the voice of the prophet and to be able to look at each cultural issue from a Biblical perspective. If you believe this to be new, then let us again look at the culture of Jesus. The Sadducees were the aristocratic religious leaders. They favored Roman rule. Why? Because Roman rule meant order and order meant their power was protected. They feared the revolutionary zealot as much as those in Rome. The Zealot or revolutionary viewed Rome as evil that must be overthrown. They believed that God's work was overthrowing the government. Both groups followed Jesus and both groups tried to trap Jesus. Yet, Jesus would not be cornered. Jesus would continue to call the Saddu-

cees to love the poor and to care for those who were not in power. Jesus would continue to remind the zealot that the Kingdom of God was not of this world.

What does it mean for us to be accountable to God in our political culture? I think it means to do exactly what Jesus told us to do. We are to love God and to love others. We need to love God. That is we need to live our lives with not only our actions, but our beliefs according to God's commands. However, we are also to take that one step further. It is not enough to believe the right thing, that is to love God, but we are also to practice the right thing, that is to love others. How does this apply to the politics of our day?

The most recent hot topic in politics is illegal immigration. We all recognize that we must be a nation of laws. We all recognize how illegal immigration is continuing to undermine the tax base, our institutions like the school system and medical care and that crime is a part of illegal immigration in some areas of our nation. We all agree that there must be a political solution, but for Christians as we maintain the need for laws, we also recognize on a personal basis that every person even the illegal immigrant is worthy of dignity. The words of scripture haunt us today as God said "welcome the stranger in your midst, for you too were once strangers in a foreign land and you were not welcomed." While we wait for a political solution the personal solution is clear. We must show love and care for those with whom we engage. We must value them as God's children and those Christ died for. We must resist the temptation to fall into racism and be victims to stereotypes as we seek to see each person as a person whom God loves.

Interestingly just last week Evangelicals, including the officials of the Southern Baptist Convention, are calling on leaders to enact an immigration law that as one pastor put it finds the middle ground between Leviticus 19, welcome the stranger and Romans 13, which gives the right of government to punish wrong doers. In fact, immigration may become the one topic where the church can function with one voice by urging our leaders to create a law that stresses legal citizenship, and at the same time reaches out to care for the needs of those who are here illegally.

It will not be the government, but it will be the church that must set a standard for the culture in regards to what we believe and what we practice. What can we do? We can hold leaders accountable-prophetic role-We can be accountable by loving God and loving others-Being salt and light.