

## **Avoiding Election Infection: "America is greatest nation on earth"**

### ***Introduction:***

Welcome, guest, series ***Avoiding Election Infection***

Like to begin our study this morning by putting an image on the screen, to get you impression of it.

### **Pic: Painting of Jesus**

The artist name is Jon McNaughton. As you can see, the foci of the work is Jesus holding the US Constitution in one hand and pointing to it with the other.

Now I can imagine that some of you, when see this painting, you see it as exactly what this country desperately needs to remember. . .that Jesus needs to be the center of this nation. That's good! As followers of Jesus, we do see Jesus as world's true leader and that everything in life functions better when He and his Kingdom values are at the center of life. This greatness this country must return.

But others of you, no doubt, probably see this painting with a fair bit of suspicion. You, like me, probably appreciate the freedoms this country provides for one to achieve and to reach their fullest potential.

However, you might be a bit concerned that an image sends the wrong message. It seems to link Jesus to closely to Americas national identity and agenda.

For this kind of reaction, this image may seem to beg an important question: ***Does Jesus play favorites when it comes to the Kingdoms of this world?***

You would certainly think so if you sat and listened to the two national conventions.

This year, we seem to have these dueling Narratives:

- *"America used to be great, need to make it great again"*
- *"America already is the greatest nation on earth"*

And you will find Christians, on either side, echoing these same sediments. They are a form of what called Nationalism.

**Nationalism: a feeling that people have of being loyal to and proud of their country often with the belief that it is better and more important than other countries.**

Not be confused w/ Patriotism. Being proud for country you live. Like Olympics.

Nationalism belief country superior. That somehow has God's unique blessing.

But again, the question must be asked:

- Does Jesus play favorites when it comes to the Kingdoms of this world?
- Does Jesus believe that some people are more important simply because of where they live?
- Is it possible that elections are the perfect breeding grounds for Nationalism to grow within the church?
- Allowing allegiance to the flag to compromise our allegiance to the cross?

To explore the answers to these question and how we should respond to these kinds of statements over the next few months, let's begin by looking back on God's plan.

God's dream for the World:

- God's dream has always been for humans to form a single, united community under his royal, loving leadership.
- This dream was shatter when our sin set us against one another and divided us up into different tribes and nations.
- But God refused to give up on this dream.
- God called a man named Abraham and told him,

*I will make you into a great nation. I will bless you and . . . you will be a blessing to others. . . . All the families on earth will be blessed through you."* Gen. 12: 2-3 NLT

Abraham and his family were to be the means by which God was going to reunite the world under God's royal, loving leadership.

The vision of a reunited humanity is hammered home with increasing clarity throughout the Hebrew Bible. Prophet after prophet spoke of how ALL NATIONS would one day be gathered together. . . and God would once again be KING over all the earth.

But no prophet better captures God's dream than Isaiah. Through him, God announces to the nations:

*"Is anyone thirsty?  
Come and drink—  
even if you have no money!"* Isaiah 55: 1 NLT

God invites everyone to come and feast at his banquet table for free and says:

*I will make an everlasting covenant with you.  
I will give you all the unfailing love I promised to David.* Isaiah 55:3 NLT

It's clear that God's goal was, and still is, to incorporate ALL NATIONS into his covenant with Israel under the reign of a King in the line of David.

That King, Christians believe, is Jesus Christ. Christ = Messiah.

That's why, when Jesus came on the scene, most people of his day were expecting an intensely nationalistic, pro-Israel, anti-Roman Messiah.

They thought the Messiah would lead Israel to victory over their pagan oppressors and would reestablish Israel as a sovereign nation under God.

But Jesus was the fulfillment of God's ultimate dream for the world, a Messiah would unite ALL nations under his loving leadership. So we see him hanging out with all the wrong people:

- Speaking to a Samaritan woman by a well.
- Healing the servant of a Roman soldier.
- Even Greeks sought Jesus out to spend time with him.

All of this to the confusion and consternation of many of the religious leaders.

Jesus actions reveal that, where God reigns, national walls are TORN DOWN and national distinctions rendered insignificant.

The Apostle Paul would go on to say that for those who are IN CHRIST, part of his forever family

*<sup>28</sup>There is no longer Jew or Gentile,<sup>[a]</sup> slave or free, male and female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus. Gal. 3: 28*

In Christ, the dividing wall of hostility has been abolished between cultures, races, tribes, nations and ONE NEW HUMANITY is being created.

That is the beauty we, as followers of Jesus, are called to reflect. That before an increasingly divided and hostile world to demonstrate what it is like for a community of people to reject tribalism and be reunited under the God who is the loving leader of ALL NATIONS.

And that's exactly what the early church did. . .for the 1<sup>st</sup> 300 years. Early Christians didn't see themselves as:

- belonging to the empire they lived in
- they refused to pledge allegiance to or fight for any ruler or country.

As a result, they were often criticized and persecuted for being unpatriotic, traitors, cowards.

But their refusal to conform and willingness to suffer demonstrated to a violent and hate filled world a radically different, more beautiful way of doing life.

- In fact, word martyr simply meant 'witness'.

However, that all changed with the supposed conversation of the Roman Emperor Constantine (pic) to Christianity.

- Constantine systemically took the symbols of Christianity and married them to the goals of the Empire.
- He had a vision telling him to go to war under the banner of Christ.

- So Christ was reduced to a pagan, nationalistic god of war.
- While some resisted this corruption of the gospel message, many others embraced it.
- Not surprisingly, in the centuries that followed, followers of Jesus lacked the capacity to distinguish clearly between the Kingdom of God and whatever national kingdom it found itself in.
- The church was often reduced to a little more than a puppet of the government, assigned the job of blessing its national causes and military exploits.

Sadly, this nationalistic, militaristic brand of Christianity played a big role in the conquering of the American continent. (Action figure pic).

- And just like other nations in history have done, they did under the banner of their tribal god. It's just that this tribal god wasn't Marduk, Zeus, or Allah. . .it was Jesus.
- In the name of the Jewish Messiah, who was to be the loving leader of ALL NATIONS, white Europeans claimed this land, slaughtered millions of Native Americans, enslaved millions of Africans, and eventually came to rule.
- And to this day, this idolatrous nations persist. Americans continue to see their nation as a "Christian nation, uniquely under God", uniquely righteous and uniquely destined by God to transform the world.
- Many former presidents, have spoken of America as the "light of the world" and a "holy city set on a hill". Heard it at both conventions.
- When you hear these phrases, hearing American form of Nationalism.
- But if followers of Jesus are not careful to clearly distinguish the Kingdom of God from their own nation, we easily end up Christianizing aspects of our national culture we should be standing against.

*"Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not?"*  
*Matthew 22: 17 NIV*

- Trying to trap Jesus (explain)
- Jesus avoided the trap, held up a coin
- Give back to Caesar what is Caesars
- Now, if you interpret Jesus literally, you'd have to conclude that Jesus was telling these leaders and this crowd to give all their money back to Caesar, for all coins bore his image! This would have been impossible for people to do, of course, or it

would have meant that people would no longer have any money. But it's clear that Jesus wasn't being literal. He was rather being sarcastic.

- To understand what he's saying, need to remember two points:
  - Ancient Jews knew that all people bear the image of God.
  - Because humans bear image, it was considered idolatrous to put one's image on anything. It was a clear violation of the 2<sup>nd</sup> commandment.
- ILL: Dead Sea Scrolls in Milwaukee. Coins only bearing palm branches, etc. Said they were printed up special by the Romans because the Jews caused such a ruckus when forced to use the others as currency.
- So it's clear what Jesus is doing here. He is turning a political Kingdom of this world question into a Kingdom of God question.
  - Are we Jews, who are supposed to be God's chosen people, actually going to argue about whether or not we should give back to Caesar the idolatrous metal that he demands of us?
  - Since it bears his idolatrous image, it belongs to him, and you can give it all back to him for all I care!
  - The question that my followers ought to be focusing on – and the only question I care to address — is this:
    - Are we giving back to God that which bears **HIS** image?
    - Are we giving God our whole self?
  - This episode illustrates once again, as so many episodes do
  - Jesus didn't come here to resolve our political questions, to give us the right form of earthly government, to tweak Caesar's program.
  - He did come to support anyone's patriotic sentiments or fulfill anyone's military aspirations,
  - He came, as the told Pilate, to establish a Kingdom that is NOT OF THIS WORLD.

*"If we give to God all that is his then there will be nothing left for Caesar". Dorothy Day*

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*"The seductive temptation for the church is to be a cheerleader for some superpower instead of a fearless witness for the Kingdom of Christ."* Brain Zahnd

How do we as Jesus followers, citizens of a new and better Kingdom that is NOT of this world, how do we inoculate ourselves to the virus of nationalism that has infected so many people/churches today?

### 1. Ask God to Search your heart

- a) Search me, O God, and know my heart;  
test me and know my anxious thoughts.

<sup>24</sup>Point out anything in me that offends you,  
and lead me along the path of everlasting life. Ps. 139

b) Brain Zahnd: “Christian Flag over the American Flag” Test

## 2. Return to the Source:

- a. We cannot keep from getting infected by virus of nationalism as long as any element of our identity, worth, significance, or security is rooted in our national allegiance.
- b. If you regularly find yourself saying, “*Our people, our flag, our troops*” and then responding with an explosive rage when you feel as those things are disrespected . . . it may be your life is tied too much up in them.
- c. We can pledge our total allegiance to Christ alone ONLY IF we’re getting ALL of our life from him.
- d. So I encourage you to return regularly, particularly over the next few months, to the one true source of life.
- e. In your prayer time, vividly imagine Jesus:
  - i. lavishing his love on you
  - ii. Envision him telling you he has reconciled you to God
  - iii. Made you a citizen of heaven
  - iv. And commissioned you to be his co-worker and ambassador of a Kingdom that breaks down every national boundary and border. .

## 3. Commit to being a transnational Christian

- a. As citizens of the Kingdom of God, it is crucial that we reset the pull of the Powers that want us to adopt a tribal, nationalistic outlook.
- b. We must never allow our love and concern for others be conditioned by the nation or culture they were born into.
- c. While our fallen hearts and minds then to care about ‘our nation’ and ‘our people’ more than others, the Kingdom heart and mind must love INDISCRIMINATELY, as Jesus commanded.

Here are some questions we can regularly ask ourselves to keep from being infected by the virus of nationalism. (turn into questions)

- d. Be intentional about stretching your tastes and preference by regularly eating food and experiencing entertainment from other countries.
- e. Join with others irregularly praying for people adversely affected by violence and calamity
- f. I’m I willing to open my home to others not like me: Neighbor, foreign exchange student.
- g. Am I a student of people whose race, cultural, nationality is not like mine.

## Conclusion:

Christians at the wall (pic)

The bishops' visit on May 7 did not disappoint. One bus of bishops and spouses crossed the border to meet with friends from the Iglesia Metodista de Mexico. Three buses made stops along the San Diego side of the border. Then we all met at Friendship Park, a bi-national congregation more than 100 strong.

To call our weekly Communion celebrations at Friendship Park "humble" is an understatement. The space between the Border Patrol's two walls allows for no formality. There are no ushers, no candles, no altar, except the one we create by laying out our plates and cups on either side of the fence. The "music department" is a wonderful 17-year-old from Tijuana, Jaime Luis, who is learning to play the guitar.

On May 7, the **bishops caught the spirit of friendship endemic to the place** and entered full force into worship. Repeatedly we sang the refrain, "Abre mis ojos, O Cristo, yo quiero verte" - "Open my eyes, O Christ, I want to see you." After a brief reading from the Scripture, we prepared ourselves for the sacrament by entering into the ritual act that stands at the center of our community's spiritual practice.

Facing the border wall with our hands held low, we ask God's forgiveness. We reach our hands to the sky and embrace God's pardon. We then place our hands on the border wall, passing the peace to our friends on the other side. Pastors consecrate bread and juice on both sides of the border. The sacrament is celebrated, and all are welcome.