

Lake Cities Community Church
July 5, 2009
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Two Questions for the 4th of July

I hope you were able to enjoy fireworks and a great 4th of July celebration with your friends and family. It is a festive and fun holiday. And I ran across this list of things that only happen “In America?” I thought you might enjoy a few of them: Only in America do we have buffalo wings that taste like chicken! Only in America is the person who invests your money called a “broker.” Only in America do we have banks that leave their doors unlocked, but chain their pens to the counter. Only in America do we have drugstores that make sick people walk to the back of the store for prescriptions, while healthy people can buy cigarettes in the front! Only in America do we use the word politics to describe the process so well. Poly being Latin for many and tics meaning blood-sucking creatures! One more. Only in America do we order a double cheeseburger, fries and a diet coke. Only in America!

Introduction

This morning we are taking a break from our study through Mark to celebrate along with our nation the 4th of July Weekend. And in that spirit, I have two questions to ask you this morning. That is the structure of my sermon. Question one. Question two, and then it is time for lunch. The first question appeared on a seminary exam for a church history class. The question was, “Is America a Christian nation? “

It is the kind of question that begs a simple yes or no answer, but on further reflection becomes more complicated. My professor, Dr. John Hannah said: “Some insist that the country

began in a flourishing Christian context that has decayed over the decades... Others, frequently with the same emotional fervor, have gathered evidence to indicate that the nation had no particular attachment to Christianity." Which is true? Is America a Christian nation? That is our first question. Let's explore that for a few minutes.

America Is a Christian Nation

In an Independence Day sermon Southern Baptist minister W.H. Ford proclaimed, "America was founded as a Christian nation. Pericles built a civilization upon culture and it failed. Caesar built a civilization on power, and it failed. Our forefathers founded our nation upon the Christian religion, and America will live so long as the Lord is our God." (Ford, Simple Sermons for Special Days and Occasions, 95).

Certainly over the years many Christian pastors have laid claim that America was founded as a Christian nation. And we might expect that from them. But also many political leaders have argued the point. The first chief justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, John Jay, wrote (1816): "Providence has given to our people the choice of their rulers, and it is the duty ... of our Christian nation to select and prefer Christians for their rulers." He called us a Christian nation. During an Independence Day speech in 1837, President John Quincy Adams said, "Why is it that, next to the birthday of the Savior of the world, your most joyous and most venerated festival returns on this day [the Fourth of July]?" "Is it not that, in the chain of human events, the birthday of the nation is indissolubly linked with the birthday of the Savior? ... Is it not that the Declaration of Independence first organized the social compact on the foundation of the Redeemer's mission upon earth? That it laid the cornerstone of human government upon the first precepts of Christianity?" That was from a U.S. President.

We have politicians and pastors arguing America is a Christian nation – but also consider some recent statistics. In a 2007 survey from the PEW Forum on Religion & Public Life of 35,000 adults, they found that 78.2% of adults in America consider themselves “Christian.” Those believing other religions, such as Judaism, Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, New Age religion” are only 4.7% *all together*.

America Is Not a Christian Nation

Is America a Christian nation? That is our first question. But... before we get too set in our opinions, let’s turn to the other side of the debate. Not everyone holds that American is a Christian nation. “*America is Not a Christian Nation*” is the title of a pamphlet from the Freedom from Religion Foundation. They point out: “The U.S. Constitution is a secular document. It begins, “We the people,” and contains no mention of “God” or “Christianity.” Its only references to religion are exclusionary, such as, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion.”

And in this vein, we must admit, that while most of our Founding Fathers believed in a higher-power, not all were friends of Christianity. Many were Deists – believing in a distant, aloof deity, very different from the God of the Bible. For example, Thomas Jefferson wrote: “I have examined all the known superstitions of the world, and I do not find in our particular superstitions of Christianity one redeeming feature. They are all alike founded on fables and mythology.”

And listen to this treaty made between the United States and Tripoli in 1797: “As the government of the United States is not, in any sense, founded on the Christian religion. As it has itself no character of enmity against the laws, religion, or tranquility of Musselman

(Muslim faith)... The treaty was assuring this Muslim country to “not worry” – that in actuality we were a secular government that could align peaceably with any nation.

Answer to the First Question

So what is the answer to the first question? Is America a Christian nation? I will give you the answer I put down on my seminary exam, which got a pretty good grade, and it is what I have been trying to demonstrate. The answer is: “Yes and no.” Yes, America is a Christian nation in the sense that it has been closely tied to Christianity since its beginning. Many of its founders were Christians and almost 80% of American’s still consider themselves Christian. But on the other hand, unlike England and other countries, our government was set up as a secular entity – not promoting a particular faith and not all of the founding fathers were friends of the Christian faith. I think we have to admit - it is a mixed bag. Yes and no.

Second Question – How do You Become a Christian?

Now the reason I have brought all of this up, was not just to deliver a lecture on religion in America, though I hope you have found this interesting and perhaps challenging. Much more could be said about this. I have asked the first question in order to get to the second question. The second question is this: “How do you become a Christian?”

Now lest you think I have just made a jump to a totally different topic, let me explain the connection between question one and question two. I have talked with many of people – dozens of people (especially in this part of the country) who hold the following belief: “Because I live in a Christian nation – I therefore must be a Christian.” How many of you have met someone with this belief. Perhaps this is your own belief? If I lived in a Muslim country I

would be Muslim. If I lived in a Buddhist country I would be Buddhist. But because I live in America – I am a Christian. The survey said that 78.2% of Americans consider themselves Christians – I wonder what percent said were Christians because they were first Americans? That is the connection between questions one and two.

So, regarding question #2, the first thing we need to know is that you can not become a Christian through any 3rd party association. You do not become a Christian because of your citizenship. You do not automatically become a Christian because you were raised in a Christian family. You do not become a Christian by membership in a church. . A pastor said, “Borrowed beliefs have no power.” They cannot save you.

Answer to 2nd Question

We will find the answer to the second question (How to become a Christian) from the Bible. Take out your Bibles if you have them and turn to Acts 16. The story is about the Apostle Paul, a leader in the early church, who is in a town called Philippi; part of the Roman Empire. There was no freedom of religion in the Roman Empire – they worshiped the pantheon of gods and especially the Emperor. And so Paul gets himself into trouble when he tells people to follow Jesus Christ. In fact he gets thrown in jail. Look at verses 19-20. **“They seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the market place before the authorities, and when they had brought them to the chief Magistrates, they said, “These men are throwing our city into confusion, being Jews, and are proclaiming customs to which it is not lawful for us to accept or observe, being Romans. Acts 16:19b-21.**

But while they are in prison, God brings an earthquake that to literally opens the doors of the jail and causes their chains to drop off their wrists. The jailer is ready to commit suicide

because he assumes that prisoners have escaped. But Paul, verse 28, “**cried out with a loud voice, saying, “Do yourself no harm, for we are all here!”** And the jailer is stunned, and knowing Paul and Silas are Christians, asks: “**What must I do to be saved?”** (30). There is our second question, isn’t it? Look now at the answer:

Acts 16:31 And they said, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you shall be saved, you and your household.” Paul says you must do one thing. What is it? Believe. Paul is saying to you, that if you want to become a Christian you must transfer your trust, faith and confidence from whatever or whomever it is in now, and put it in Jesus Christ. Do you believe? Believe, and you will be saved.

You might say, Craig, that is too easy. Surely there must be more too it than that? Isn’t there some paperwork to fill out? Some hoops to jump through? No there really isn’t. Let me stress the point through some additional Scriptures. It is theologically vital for you to understand the answer to question #2. As I read these, when we come to the magic word – you say that word with me, OK?

Acts 16:34: And he brought them into his house and set food before them, and rejoiced greatly, having **believed in God with his whole household. Rom. 1:16: For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who **believes**. 1Tim. 1:16: And yet for this reason I found mercy...as an example for those who would **believe** in Jesus for eternal life. John 3:16: “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever **believes** in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. John 5:24: “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and **believes** Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not**

come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life. Mark 1:15: Jesus was saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and **believe** in the gospel.”

Question “How do you become a Christian?” Answer? Believe. Now you know why they call Christians, “Believers.” Do you believe in Jesus? That Jesus came, lived and died on the cross for your sins and rose from the dead? *Belief is the one ingredient necessary for eternal life.*

Conclusion

I would like to close with a story. The young girl spat in the face of the young man. She said through clenched teeth, “I don’t believe you. I hate you. Stop making fun of me.” The year was 1849 and the young man had just arrived in New Orleans after striking it rich in the gold rush of California. He had happened upon the sale of slaves. The young black girl had been put on display; and the jokes and comments of evil intention from the crowd were shameful. The price had gone up and up for she was very beautiful. As the auctioneer called out, “Going once. Going twice,” the young miner called out a number twice the current bid and spending most of his gold, he bought her.

But the young man had compassion and pity on the girl. He left the girl on the boardwalk, and went to the store owner, paid the rest of his gold to draw up papers called manumission papers. They were papers giving the girl her freedom. He had just returned to the girl and given her the papers, when she said, “I don’t believe you. I hate you. Stop making fun of me.”

“No, listen,” he pleaded. “I’m not making fun of you. I bought you to set you free. These are your freedom papers. She looked at them, but she could not read. “You are a free person,”

he said, "You must trust me." The storeowner came out and verified what the young man had said. And as she began to see the truth, the young girl fell to her knees in front of the miner, tears streaming down her face. "You bought me to set me free! You bought me to set me free! I owe you my life." She finally believed the young man's word and it changed her life forever.

The Bible tells us that we were slaves to sin, but that Jesus bought our freedom with the high price of his life, when he died on the cross in our place. He drew up your freedom papers and has handed them to you. But most of us are like the young girl – We don't really believe. We can't believe anyone would spend their fortune on us, so we continue to live in slavery.

Like the girl in this story. Like the jailer and ever person over the last 2,000 years. **If you want to become a Christian, you have to believe.** Perhaps God is speaking to you right now. You have felt him stirring in your soul. I want to urge you to believe in Jesus today – to give you life to him now. Please bow with me.

If you are ready to believe in Jesus – make these words your own, in the quietness of your own heart. Pray them to God. **Dear God.** I know that I am a sinner. I know my sins deserve to be punished. But I believe, right now, that Jesus Christ died for me and rose from the grave. I trust Jesus alone as my Lord and Savior. Thank you for the forgiveness and eternal life that I now have. In Jesus name. Amen.