

GOD BLESS AMERICA!

Today is the 4th of July. On this date in 1776 the people of 13 Colonies declared independence from Great Britain. They fought for freedom and paid the price for this freedom. They prayed, “God bless America!” And our Lord did and still does! Yet, sadly, the tendency of many is to take for granted our freedom, the price paid for our freedom, and the blessings God has given to our free nation. It reminds me of a far greater freedom: the freedom from sin, death, and satan. Too often the world, even Christians, take for granted, forget, or ignore the price Jesus paid for this freedom and the multitude of blessings it brings to us now and in eternity.

You know that in the LORD’S Prayer we ask, “**Give us this day our daily bread.**” In His fatherly goodness our gracious God blesses us with our daily bread, which provides for all life’s many necessities. As Luther reminds us in his explanation of the 4th Petition, “*What is meant by daily bread? Everything that belongs to the support and wants of the body, such as meat, drink, clothing, shoes, house, homestead, field, cattle, money, goods, a pious spouse, pious children, pious servants, pious and faithful magistrates, good government, good weather, peace, health, discipline, honor, good friends, faithful neighbors, and the like.*” Did you catch the words, “good government?” But instead thanking God for His gift of America, we argue over the relationship between the church and state. My friends let us thank our LORD for GOD HAS BLESSED AMERICA!

The relationship between the Church and State are addressed in the First Amendment in the Bill of Rights: “***Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof;***”

Yet many seem to be confused over the separation of church and state in two ways. Our forefathers were not confused. The first confusion is some see this as a law that forbids any form of public expression of religious thought, total non reference to anything religious in any arena even remotely connected to the government. Others see it as telling churches not to be concerned about governmental issues and to stay out of politics.

But the 1st Amendment does not prohibit us from praising and thanking God. 1st Amendment also says, “... (Congress shall make no law) ***abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to***

assemble; . . .”We have the freedom to gather to thank God, even if the rest of the nation does not believe in God or refuses to honor and worship God. And as a church we have the right and the obligation to pray that God would bless our nation and grant our military victory in times of war.

We, as Christian Americans, are to try to maintain a balance of separation between church and state. Lutherans should be fairly good at this, since Luther wrote extensively on the topic of the two kingdoms: the kingdom of the right (the church) and the kingdom of the left (the state).

This brings us to the second confusion. Many Christians think that America is a Christian nation, the new Chosen People of God. And so they think that they can force laws on people with the intent to change them and force them into being Christians. We hear this in such statements as, “If only public schools had prayers in them, then there would be less crime among teens, teenage pregnancy would go down, and everyone would live by Christian values and morals.” Or “If only the 10 Commandments were taught in public schools there would be more law and order in our land. Friends, laws, no matter how sincere our motives and pure our intentions, laws do not change people. John Calvin tried that twice in Geneva, Switzerland. Twice he tried to legislate Geneva into being a Christian community. Both times John failed. Laws do not change the hearts of people. Laws do not make people obedient. Do you really want to end racial discrimination, eliminate abortion, or stop road rage? There is only one way: the Gospel of Jesus. It alone has the power to change the hearts of people. Only the Gospel can lead people to begin to live a new life. Only the Gospel can motivate a person show Christian love.

As painful as it may sound, America is not a Christian nation. America is a pluralistic nation with many Christians living in her. True, most of our founding fathers were either Christians or Deists. True, the principles upon which America was founded are Christian. True as Christians we are interested in furthering justice, equality, and fairness. Yet how could we be considered a Christian nation when less than 1/5 of all Americans will worship God in a Christian church this weekend? Would a Christian nation encourage abortion on demand, protect the sex industries, or allow corporations to willfully pollute our environment that God has created?

Let us remember that the separation of church and state is good because the function of government and the function of the church are not one and the

same. They are different. Do you want Harry Reid or Arlen Specter to hear your confessions or write your sermons; or the church deciding tax legislation or determining the budget for the Defense Department?

St. Paul summarizes the function of the state in Romans 13:1-7: the state is to protect the law abiding citizens and punish the law breakers. The government provides us with law and order. Consider the many blessings our nation gives us for which we can thank God: hospitals, roads, emergency assistance, police and fire protection, harbors and airports, schools, a strong military, and the IRS. The function of churches is quite different. Churches are to sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ, ministering to people in need, in crisis, in fear, or who are lost, do mission work, teach the Word of God, and assist parents in the religious instruction of their children.

Think of the blessings God has given America: an abundance of natural resources, a unique blend of people, transportation systems, consumer protection, economic and political freedoms, a military second to none, commerce, educational opportunities, and much, much, more. Let's give thanks to the LORD for America. We pray, "God bless America!" And God has already answered our prayers and blessed America!

There are real dangers when we mix the two kingdoms: the church and the state. One is that we are tempted to equate our nation with God's kingdom on earth. We can develop an air of superiority over other nations, arrogantly think we are God's favorite, and foolishly overestimate our power and capabilities in times of war. Another danger is that we tend to overlook, minimize, or rationalize our national mistakes and wrongs. We have too often remained silent as people misuse our freedoms to take advantage of the poor and elderly, and to corrupt others through drugs, sex, pornography, and illegal activities. And still another danger we think we can force people into being Christians and we cease personal evangelism and witnessing the truth of the Gospel of Jesus. And a final danger is we think we are so good that God is compelled to bless us and be at our beckon call.

Israel had similar thoughts. But in our Old Testament lesson, Moses warned them to dispel any thoughts of triumphalism. Deuteronomy 9:4-6. God reminded them not to think it was because Israel was so great, good, or powerful that the He gave them such a wonderful land filled with milk and honey. No, they had nothing to do with it! It was all God's love!!!

The idea of the separation of Church and State goes back to the time of Jesus. It come in the midst of the question, “How can a child of God support a pagan, evil, anti-God government?” Pro life supporters sometime ask the same. Notice the trap that was set for Jesus. Two opposing groups, the Pharisees and the Herodians, send a joint delegation to trick Jesus. The Pharisees saw Roman as the vicious, pagan conquerors and an abomination to God. No real messiah would accept their dominance. The Herodians were supporters of King Herod who owed his kingdom to the graces of Caesar. Only a traitor would not encourage people to support the Romans.

Now the question: “**Is it lawful to pay taxes to Roman?**” Can a believer in good conscience pay taxes to a corrupt, evil government?” If Jesus said, “No!” the Herodians would claim Jesus to be a traitor. If Jesus said, “Yes” then the Pharisees could deny that Jesus is the Messiah sent by God. Jesus did not take the bait. Rather he asked for a coin and asked whose portrait is on the coin. After determining that the coin was one used in daily commerce and not a coin used in temple offerings, Jesus replied, “**Render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.**”

St. Paul’s advice for Christians in Galatians 5 also applies to Christian citizens of any nation, including America. Jesus has set us free from sin, from the punishment of hell and eternal damnation. Why go back into a life of sin? Jesus freed us to life a new life, a life that trusts God, follows God, and walks with God. We are free to obey God, and follow His teachings. We can do this when we walk by the Spirit; when we are in the Word of God: studying it, learning it, using it as a guide. Now in life we can do the God pleasing thing and stay in fellowship with the LORD.

In life there are lots of temptations to misuse, abuse, twist, and even ignore the freedoms we have as Americans. Why do it? When we are one with Jesus, when we are in His Word, and when we walk with Him, we will use our freedoms as Americans in a way that services, gives glory and honor to God, and serves and helps our fellow man. In other words, when we follow Jesus and live our faith, we will use our political freedoms as American Christians in the best and most productive way. Jesus frees us to be free!

This Fourth of July, remember the blessings we have as free Americans. Remember to thank God for He is the source of all that is good. And ask God to remember our country. Remember to pray today and every day, “God bless America!” He will, He has, and He will continue to do so. Amen.