



Pastor Ken's Sermon

**SERMON – 7TH PENTECOST
AMOS 7:7-15 AND MARK 11:27-33
JULY 11, 2021**

“A WORLDVIEW THROUGH HEAVEN’S EYES”

In May 1933, Rudolf Bultmann, Professor of New Testament at the University of Marburg in Germany, began one of his lectures by saying “as Christians...the first thing we must do is reflect on what is...the relation of faith to nation and state, or the relation between the life of faith and the life of the political order... No nation is so pure and clean that one may explain every stirring of the national will as the direct demand of God. As nature and all our personal relations with one another have become uncanny as a result of sin, so has nationality...every state and nation bear within itself not only the possibilities and tasks of the good and the beautiful, but also the temptations to the evil and the mean.”

Bultmann would later join Dietrich Bonhoeffer in what came to be called “the Confessing Church.” Both men saw unfold before them the dangers of confusing God’s “two kingdoms” – the political realm in which God stewards creation through government, and the spiritual realm in which God creates faith through the gospel. They saw the danger of confusing national and Christian identity. Today we’ll conclude our series of sermons on “civic citizenship” with emphasis on the “how are we to be responsible citizens with respect to a Christian worldview.”

Christian “worldview” can mean a lot of things, but would surely include belief in the supernatural, the gift and task of being a disciple of Jesus Christ, accepting the Bible as God’s word and our ultimate authority, participation in Christian community submitting oneself to the accountability that comes with being a part of such a community, and the belief that God is active in human history no less now than ever. Sadly, many people are turning from the church – emerging generations in particular, because they question or have concluded that the church itself no longer believes these things – as a matter of first importance anyway.

Instead, they have concluded that the church – and this applies to the American church across the spectrum - has made a horrible confusion of the kingdoms much as Professor Bultmann warned his students about. Russell Moore, until recently Director of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the SBC, wrote these Christians have come to perceive that “religion itself has become a vehicle for politics and cultural grievances.” He said it sounds to this audience that “this church or that’s Good News” is no longer “take up your cross and follow me” but “come with us and we’ll own the libs (or take down the conservatives).

There has in recent years been an inordinate amount of attention paid to the “religious voters” in our elections – along with more visible engagement of church bodies in the political process. Appeals are made to followers that “the country is at stake” and in the case of adherents of what has been called “Christian nationalism” – the cry goes out “our very culture is at stake.” Defined broadly as the promoting of national interest – nationalism is fine. In that form it’s akin to patriotism, a virtue of citizens that should be encouraged and practiced.

God has called us to love all people even as God allows us to love particular places and people in a particular way. Nothing about loving our country or our families suggests we hate France or Thailand or families in those countries. Having a “Christian worldview” means that all people who love Jesus are our brother and sister even if “siblings in Christ” happen to also love their countries a bit more than others. But if this thing called nationalism becomes narrow by becoming “Christian” then it becomes distorted. We confuse two kingdoms. Patriotism is love of country – nationalism is how we “define country”, and by extension those who belong to it and those who don’t. Christianity as a culture – a uniquely American culture that is, picks its members.

Naturally it falls to government to, if not “enforce” this, then at the very least give preference to it. The danger is that we take the name of Christ and attach it to a worldly political agenda. Yes, believers should “fear God and honor the king” at I Peter 2:17 suggests. But our worldview should be nothing less than what Jesus said in John 3:16 – God so loved the world that he gave (it) his only Son...and with that verse it’s oft overlooked succeeding verse, which says that when Jesus is “lifted up, he will draw ALL people to himself.” It’s difficult, if not inconceivable, that such a statement would mean that our Lord has any political ideals that even begin to approach his will of bringing the world and all its cultures and political systems to the foot of the cross in repentance for forgiveness.

Our citizenship is in heaven, and from there we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. That is our national identity. Turning to our lessons for today, we hear echoes of this struggle between “God and king” and between the authority of men and God. In our Old Testament lesson, Amos is confronted by the prophet who worked in the king’s court – Amaziah, who in so many words said “get out of dodge” you seer! Every charge he laid on Amos (which weren’t necessarily untrue) was that Amos was “unpatriotic” – critical of the king, the nation of Israel, and its people. Amos was charged with being thoroughly “un-Israelite.” Go back to your own country Amos – you’re not one of us is literally what he was told. And yet Amos said God had sent him because of his love for “his people Israel.”

Our Lord Jesus was confronted by folks who for all intents and purposes were saying the same thing – “whose side are you on.” Immediately after this story in Mark 11, Jesus is given a nationalistic litmus test – is it lawful (read loyal) to pay taxes to Caesar. Jesus would have none of it – at least until and unless the Jewish leaders declared where their allegiance lay – with God or with men. Having a “Christian worldview” means foremost that, in the words of that catchy song in Disney’s “Prince of Egypt” – we look at the world through heaven’s eyes. It means understanding that Christians in America as citizens of heaven are simply positioned to bless that part of God’s creation we happen to live in – love it in the process.

Rudolph Bultmann went on to tell his students in 1933, “the criterion for each one of us is whether, in the struggle, we are really sustained by love – love that not only looks to the future in which it hopes to realize it’s ideal, but also sees the concrete neighbor to whom we are now bound in the present by all the commonplace ties of life. The right to demand sacrifice and exercise severity belongs only to him who sees his neighbor in those who are affected by what he does.” In Jeremiah 29, God told nationless Jewish exiles to “seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers you too will prosper. Well-being of all is what God in Christ seeks – it’s our “worldview” and is what we as Christians ought be particularly well suited to do. AMEN