

Ungodly hubris

The Bible is pretty clear about how people should live their lives. And in the U.S., faith-driven people no doubt identify more with the good book's heroes than its villains. Yet it's fair to ask, is this country living up to God's expectations?

By Oliver Thomas

When the last vote is tallied and the last yard sign pulled down, Democrats and Republicans must go back to being “one nation under God.” That’s especially important when we’re beset by economic woes at home and a two-front war abroad.

As a minister, I’m mindful that most Americans are citizens of two kingdoms. They’re loyal Americans, but they’re also people of faith. Thus, their patriotism is tempered by their loyalty to a God who transcends all national and international boundaries whose precinct is the universe.

My father, who was a Baptist deacon as well as a World War II veteran, was such a patriot. Pop taught me that true patriotism is not a contest to see who can fly the biggest flag. True patriotism exists where citizens love their country enough to hold it accountable. That means working to make certain that the president we have elected and the government we have created live up to the words of our creeds and the dreams of our poets and prophets.

That kind of patriotism is at the heart of authentic biblical faith. The great prophets of the Bible were considered unpatriotic by many of their day. No wonder. In two of Israel’s most cataclysmic wars one in the eighth century B.C. and one in the sixth B.C. both Amos and Jeremiah had the unmitigated gall to tell the Hebrew people that God was not on their side! Can you conceive of the howl that would erupt if a preacher today suggested that God was using Arab terrorists to humble America? The First Amendment might save him from arrest (the prophet Jeremiah was not so lucky), but any such preacher would almost certainly be relieved of his pulpit duties, if not run out of town. The conflation of religion and patriotism is so widespread in our country today that most of us would never entertain the notion that America’s foreign or domestic policies might fall short of what God requires.

By God, we’re right

Part of our challenge stems from the fact that we Americans have an overabundance of self-confidence. So much, in fact, that management guru Marshall Goldsmith reports that 70% of the 50,000 people he has surveyed rank themselves in the top 10% of their peer group. Among doctors, pilots and investment bankers, the number is even higher. Once when Goldsmith told a group of doctors that his “extensive research” had revealed that exactly half of all MDs graduated in the bottom half of their med-school class, two in the audience insisted that this was impossible.

I suspect we read the Bible much the same way. We don’t identify with the Egyptians, Babylonians or the multitude of Israelites who worshiped the golden calf. We identify with

Abraham and Moses the good guys. Likewise, in the New Testament, we don't identify with the scribes and the Pharisees. And we certainly don't identify with those hated Romans. We identify with Peter, James and John. But like Marshall Goldsmith's overweening physicians, we might be fooling ourselves. Look beneath the surface, and much of what's plaguing the world is what's plaguing us.

For starters, we're greedy. America consumes more than its fair share of most everything: gasoline, food, plastic, you name it. On a personal level, millions of us are overweight, overspent and overleveraged. The subprime mortgage crisis is all about people wanting more than they can afford. And despite greed's appearance on the list of "seven deadly sins" and the Bible's admonishment to refrain from excessive borrowing, the average American carries more than \$2,000 in credit-card debt on top of his household mortgage. Collectively, we behave much the same way. The unpaid balance on our national credit card now tops \$10 trillion.

Although I hate to admit it, we're also violent. Jesus of Nazareth famously taught his followers to turn the other cheek when confronted with violence, yet the United States remains one of the most violent of the so-called developed nations. I'm not even talking here about our various wars and incursions. We kill one another at an alarming rate. According to the Children's Defense Fund, a child is killed by firearm every three hours in the USA. That's eight a day.

Perhaps the best measure of a nation is how it treats its most vulnerable citizens. Here, again, we Americans fall short. Our infant mortality rate is among the highest of the developed nations. According to America's most notable child advocate, Marian Wright Edelman, 9 million of our children lack health insurance. The only time many of these kids see a doctor is in a hospital emergency room.

While we sit there at Starbucks happily drinking our lattes, half the world is getting by on less than \$3 a day. And although growing numbers of us are volunteering, our government's efforts overseas are relatively meager when compared with other prosperous nations. Most of the overseas assistance we do provide is military-related and in service of our own strategic goals. In contrast, the Bible time and again admonishes God's people to advance the cause of the poor and to show hospitality to foreigners. Interestingly, nations are also warned not to put their trust in the weapons of war.

An imperfect union

Don't get me wrong. The U.S. is a great nation. She has pushed the bounds of science and technology and brought prosperity to the masses, creating the world's largest middle class. She has defeated some of the world's vilest villains and brought freedom and the rule of law to the farthest reaches of the planet. But she is not perfect. She has toppled democratically elected governments in favor of friendly dictators and firebombed civilians. She has consumed resources at a dangerous pace and ravaged the environment in the process. She has allowed her cities to fester and her family farms to wither and die. And, she has gone from a progressive tax structure, that was built upon the biblical premise that to whom much is given much is required, to one that provides massive tax relief to the people who need it least, the rich.

The faith community has our work cut out for us if America is to become the “city upon a hill” envisioned by some of our greatest leaders. And if self-awareness is the beginning of wisdom, perhaps we should start by reading the Bible with different eyes. Let’s lose the hubris. Maybe we’re not ancient Israel. Maybe we’re Rome.

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