

What Is a Christian Nation? (Pt. 3)

Romans 13:1

September 12, 2010

Rev. Greg L. Price

This past week, we have witnessed much news over the threatened burning of Islam's sacred book, the Quran. Even elected officials have gotten into the battle, the President even claiming that such a burning of the Quran denies the religious principles upon which our nation was founded: namely, religious pluralism. There was mention even made by the President that we as nation have different names in the various religions for the same God (He said he will do all he can "to remind the American people that we are one nation under God. And we might call that God different names, but we remain one nation."). Did any elected official stand up to disagree with the President that this nation was not founded upon religious pluralism in officially tolerating and recognizing the Pantheon of gods and religions practiced in this nation? No, not that I am aware of. For though I disagree with the moral correctness of such statements, I do not disagree with the historical accuracy of such statements. Indeed, the United States was not officially founded as a Christian nation. To the contrary, Christianity was simply one religion among many that was and is officially tolerated, protected, and defended within this nation. Remember, to constitutionally and legally tolerate all religions is to constitutionally and legally defend the rights and equality of all religions to enjoy the same freedom and liberty. And that, dear ones, to our national shame and disgrace is to establish Polytheism (not biblical Christianity) as the established religion of this nation.

Dear ones, a moral wrong can never be a civil right. For all rights (civil and religious alike) originate with God (not with man); and if God does not establish a civil right to practice a false religion within any nation (which He does not, but to the contrary declares that false religion must not be

tolerated as a rival to the one true religion, Deuteronomy 12:2,3), then such an alleged civil right does not exist (regardless of what a civil government constitutionally tolerates and defends). And a nation that legally creates out of thin air such an alleged right only demonstrates that it is not a Christian nation, but is rather a rebellious nation usurping the place of God and Christ.

Dear ones, this should present a very serious problem for every Christian who embraces the Old and New Testaments as the only infallible rule for faith and practice. How can a nation (through its elected officials) grant a religious right or freedom to practice a false religion and to worship a false god that Jehovah, the Triune God of the Bible, has not granted, but has to the contrary condemned ("Thou shalt have no other gods before me" Exodus 20:3)? The Larger Catechism (of the Westminster Standards) declares as one of the duties required in the Second Commandment (Question 108) the following: "the disapproving, detesting, opposing, all false worship; and, according to each one's place and calling [including the civil magistrate—GLP], removing it, and all monuments of idolatry." In Question 109 of the Larger Catechism, one of the sins forbidden is "tolerating a false religion."

If the moral wrong of abortion can never be a civil right (which all Bible-believing Christians must affirm) because the Moral Law of God condemns all murder in the Sixth Commandment ("Thou shalt not kill" Exodus 20:13), how can the moral wrong of false religion/polytheism become a civil right when the same Moral Law of God condemns all false gods (and all false religions) in the First Commandment? But someone will say that the First Commandment does not apply to civil government, but the Sixth Commandments does apply to civil government. Where I ask is that taught in the Bible? It isn't. Dear ones, such a statement is simply an assertion of man that has no biblical warrant. We cannot pick

and choose which commandments of God's Moral Law we want to apply to the Divine institutions of family, church, and state, which God Himself has established for His own glory. And this is especially evident when we consider that God Himself has instituted lawful civil government for His own glory and for the good of man (Romans 13:1,2,4), that Jehovah God is King of the nations and judges nations for their false religions (Jeremiah 10:7,10,11), and that Jesus Christ is God's appointed Mediator under whose lordship and dominion all nations have been subjected and to whom alone all civil rulers and nations must bring their worship or suffer His wrath (Psalm 2:8-12; Psalm 22:28; Revelation 1:5; Revelation 19:16). Therefore, God and His Mediator (Jesus Christ) alone have the authority to establish the moral duties and moral rights of magistrates, citizens, and nations. The nations of this world are always up in arms over the violation of so-called human rights, but what nation and its civil leaders are up in arms over the violation of the rights of the Triune God who is revealed in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments? I submit that a nation that is truly a Christian nation will first constitutionally and legally defend the rights of God and His Christ as revealed in the Bible, and then will constitutionally and legally defend the rights of man as revealed in the Bible. A nation that will not constitutionally and legally uphold and defend the rights of Jehovah God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), but will to the contrary defame the rights of the Triune God by legally tolerating false religion, is not and cannot be a Christian nation.

This Lord's Day, let us consider the following main points as we consider what a Christian nation is: (1) Lawful Civil Government Is Ordained of God (Romans 13:1,2); (2) Arguments Offered By Those Who Assert That The United States Is A Christian Nation.

I. Lawful Civil Government Is Ordained of God (Romans 13:1).

A. We will have opportunity in the future to delve more deeply into the inspired truth taught by the apostle Paul in Romans 13, but let us seek in this sermon to establish just one truth in particular: Lawful civil government is a moral institution established by God. And since that is the case (as we shall see), it is to God and His Moral Law that all the laws of nations must conform; otherwise such an immoral perversion of civil government ceases in those instances to be the ordinance of God. Consider that likewise although marriage is a moral institution established by God, if marriage becomes perverted by unlawful divorces of a valid marriage followed by an unlawful legal union with another person, or becomes perverted by incestual or same-sex relationships, it ceases in those particular instances to be the ordinance of God. The ordinance of God (whether marriage, church, or state) must have the moral character of that which God established or it ceases to be the ordinance of God.

B. Paul's purpose in Romans 13:1-7 is to address a problem that apparently some Christians wrestled with after their conversion and which forms the reason why some of the New Testament writers address the matter of civil government: an anti-government position that alleged a liberty and freedom from all civil government in the world. Peter writes concerning false teachers who "despise government" (2 Peter 2:10), and Jude likewise mentions those who "despise dominion" (Jude 8). Hostility to government (even to lawful government) was not something novel in the days of the apostle's among God's people, but also manifested itself in the days of Moses when Korah and his accomplices rebelled against the lawful civil government instituted by God in Israel by insisting that the whole congregation were holy and should not be ruled by Moses and Aaron (Numbers 16:3). Thus, it would seem that since the lawful ordinance of civil government was in hazard of being denigrated by false teachers, and since Christianity was in hazard of being brought under

reproach by the teaching of these false teachers, it fell to the apostles to warn the churches and to clarify what was indeed the lawful ordinance of civil government instituted by God for His own glory and for the good of society and the church.

C. What is the lawful ordinance of civil government concerning which Paul here speaks in Romans 13?

1. Paul calls the lawful ordinance of civil government instituted by God “the higher powers” (Romans 13:1a). The word translated as “powers” (exousiai in Greek) usually refers to moral power as distinguished from physical or natural power (which is dunamis in Greek). Thus, Paul addresses here **the moral quality** (i.e. the lawful right to rule) of the civil powers as the ordinance of God. This is further evidenced by the word that modifies “powers”: namely, the word “higher” i.e. “the higher powers.” By “the higher powers”, Paul does not mean those magistrates holding a higher position than others, but rather the phrase, “the higher powers”, refers to the higher (or “excellent”) moral qualities of that civil government to which we are to submit for conscience sake as the lawful ordinance of God. The Greek word translated as “higher” (hyperechousais) is only used 5 times in the New Testament (Romans 13:1; Philippians 2:3; Philippians 3:8; Philippians 4:7; 1 Peter 2:13). I would suggest that our English translators have missed the significance of the word and made it refer to degrees in rank rather than degrees in moral quality. For we find the true sense of the Greek word, hyperechousais, from a brief look at the 3 places in Philippians where this word is used (the reference in 1 Peter 2:13, like that in Romans 13:1, refers to lawful civil government), and in none of these passages does hyperechousais refer to a higher or supreme rank or position, but rather in all 3 instances, hyperechousais refers to excellent moral qualities.

a. Consider **Philippians 2:3**, where the emphasis is not in regard to esteeming others to have a higher rank or position in the chain of command than yourself, but rather esteeming in others what is of an excellent quality by way of God's gifts and graces as opposed to what is merely of an excellent quality by way of God's gifts and graces in yourself.

b. Look at **Philippians 3:8**, where the thrust of the verse is not a knowledge of Christ that has a higher status or rank of command, but a knowledge of Christ that has a more excellent moral quality.

c. Finally, examine **Philippians 4:7**, where we are not to understand the peace of God that has a higher rank or order than understanding, but rather the peace of God that qualitatively transcends our finite understanding.

2. Thus, Paul is not speaking of civil rulers who have a higher or supreme rank within the chain of command in the civil government, for why would Paul only address submission to those civil rulers who have a higher rank as opposed to those who hold a lower rank? All civil rulers (whether of a higher or lower rank) are to be submitted to according to Paul in Romans 13, provided they evidence in their civil government the excellent moral qualities required by God as the moral ordinance He has established. Dear ones, Paul (in Romans 13:1) does not describe as the ordinance of God just any civil government or civil ruler that may be in power by God's providence (whether Nero, Hitler, the Beast of Revelation, or Satan himself) or just any civil government that may be approved by the people. For the Third Reich of Germany (under Hitler) had the consent and support of the people (and yet was an unlawful civil government due to its moral disqualification). To the contrary, that civil government according to Paul is only the ordinance of God that has the "higher" (or "excellent") moral qualities found in God's Moral Law, so that when Paul continues in Romans 13:1ff to address the

powers that be, he is addressing only those lawful powers that be as morally ordained of God as His ordinance.

3. This interpretation of “the higher powers” as being a reference to only those civil governments that have the excellent moral character revealed by God’s Moral Law is further confirmed when we consider what Paul says about the rulers of such lawful civil governments in Romans 13:3,4.

a. The rulers of lawful, moral civil governments that are the ordinance of God “are not a terror to good works, but to the evil” and give “praise” to and honor the good works of their citizens (Romans 13:3). That is, lawful magistrates of a civil government that is the ordinance of God or that is a Christian nation do not frame laws to defend evil works like idolatry, polytheism, atheism, witchcraft, Satanism, sabbath-breaking, murder of over 50 million unborn children (since 1973 in the U.S according to the Alan Guttmacher Institute), adultery, sodomy, pornography, unlawful divorces, and theft of property through eminent domain or excessive taxation. But rather lawful magistrates of a civil government that is the ordinance of God or that is a Christian nation become a terror by way of just laws against these same wicked and immoral practices.

b. The rulers of lawful, moral civil governments that are the ordinance of God are “the ministers of God” to the people and to the church of Christ for good, and are “the ministers of God” in avenging God’s wrath against those who do evil (Romans 13:4), and so they declares themselves to be. But how can a civil government or its rulers be the ministers of God to the people and to the church of Christ for good, when the constitution and laws by which these civil leaders rule and to which they have sworn they would uphold and defend refuse to officially kiss the Son and rather legally tolerate (and therefore officially promote) all the evils (and much more) that were just mentioned contrary to the Moral Law of God? Dear ones, such a civil government cannot be either

the ordinance of God or a Christian nation, especially when it has the revelation of God's Moral Law available throughout the country and yet has rebelliously resisted that Divine revelation.

II. Arguments Offered By Those Who Assert That The United States Is A Christian Nation.

A. Some assert that the U.S. Constitution is Christian in nature.

1. Now while there may be some biblical principles of a representative form of government found in the Constitution and some moral civil rights preserved in it, the problem that we find with the Constitution of the United States is that it does not officially honor the Triune God revealed in the Bible as the One who has instituted lawful civil government as His ordinance (per Romans 13:1); it does not officially "kiss" the Son of God as the "prince of the kings of the earth" and as the "King of kings and Lord of lords" (Psalm 2:12; Revelation 1:5; Revelation 19:16); it does not establish the Moral Law of God as the supreme law of the land, it does not establish Christianity, the religion of Christ, God's appointed Mediator, as the official religion of the nation; nor does it require the civil rulers of this nation to swear to uphold these biblical characteristics of a Christian nation as the ordinance of God. To the contrary, the Constitution and Laws of the United States legally tolerate (and therefore legally promote) the laundry list of moral evils mentioned earlier. I submit that a Christian nation does not and cannot legally disallow Christ, His Law, and His religion, while legally tolerating (and therefore legally promoting and defending) that which Jesus Christ has revealed in Scripture that He hates and condemns.

2. Some assert that the U.S. Constitution is a Christian document because it mentions in Article 7 the date of ratification as follows: "Done in Convention by the Unanimous Consent of the States present the Seventeenth Day of September **in the year of our Lord** one

thousand seven hundred and Eighty seven" It is maintained by some very vocal Christians that this phrase, "in the year of our Lord", clearly declares that those representatives who ratified the Constitution were by this phrase officially "kissing" the Son and officially recognizing the nation to be a Christian nation under the lordship of Jesus Christ.

a. In response, it should be first noted that the Gregorian calendar was introduced in 1582 by pope Gregory XIII in order to account for some mistakes found in the previous Julian calendar. The Gregorian calendar dated a year in terms of whether it came before the birth of Christ (BC) or after the birth of Christ (AD from the Latin *anno domini* i.e. in the year of our Lord). This was the calendar officially used and recognized at that time in western Europe and in the dominions of Britain (such as Canada and the United States).

b. "In the year of our Lord" (or its Latin equivalent) became for all intents and purposes about as religious as the use of "Sunday" in honor of the sun god, or as the use of "January" in honor of the Roman god "Janus" (in other words, the religious significance of these terms was replaced by its civil significance in legal documents). In fact, when the word "Sunday" is used in the Constitution (in Article 1, Section 7) we also understand that due to the pagan origins of the term for that day of the week that all those in the Constitutional Convention were religiously honoring the sun as an official declaration of pagan worship? The religious origins in reference to the calendar (whether "the year of our Lord", or "Sunday", or "January" etc.) came to be used primarily in a civil rather than in a religious sense.

c. What "in the year of our Lord" meant to some of those at the Constitutional Convention as to their personal religious beliefs and what it meant to others was not necessarily the same (for represented in the Constitutional Convention were both Deists and Unitarians who did not believe that Jesus Christ was God the Lord).

d. Furthermore, the Constitution itself makes it clear in

Article 6 that there can be no religious test or qualification required of those who hold office (so “in the year of our Lord” could not have been intended as some official religious declaration that the United States is a Christian nation). Likewise, the Constitution also declares in the First Amendment that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof” (so “in the year of our Lord” once again could not have been intended as some official declaration that the United States is a Christian nation). If the Constitution was intended to declare the United States as a Christian nation, why no direct mention of this in the Constitution, why the explicit denial of it in the Treaty of Tripoli of 1797 (see the previous sermon), and why were all such attempts to include a Christian Amendment in the Constitution unsuccessful (see the previous sermon)?

e. Thus, I submit “in the year of our Lord” was common dating terminology that was used in legal documents without officially intending to declare the religious affiliation of those using it.

2. Secondly, some assert that the Constitution declares the United States to be a Christian nation because it allows ten days for the President to veto a law signed by Congress (“excepting Sundays” i.e. not counting any intervening Sundays within that ten days, Article 1, Section 7). The fact that Sundays are specifically excluded from the ten days in which the President has to sign a veto has been offered by some Christians as indicating that the Constitution officially recognizes the Christian Sabbath, Sunday; and therefore, the Constitution officially declares the nation to be a Christian nation.

a. There is no recorded debate from the Constitutional Convention as to indicate what the founders intended by the exclusion of Sundays within the ten day period in which the President has to sign a veto. So any assertions that this is an official recognition of the Christian Sabbath is mere speculation and not based upon any such reasoning from those at the Constitutional Convention.

b. Again, both Article 6 of the Constitution (which prohibits any religious tests or qualifications to hold office) and the First Amendment (which prohibits Congress from officially establishing or prohibiting any religion) should make it clear that this provision in excluding Sundays was not intended to be an official declaration that the United States was a Christian nation.

c. And as stated in the previous response, if the Constitution was intended to declare the United States as a Christian nation, why no direct mention of this in the Constitution, why the explicit denial of it in the Treaty of Tripoli of 1797, and why were all such attempts to include a Christian Amendment in the Constitution unsuccessful?

d. It would appear that the reason for excluding Sundays within the ten day period that the President has to sign a veto was the fact that in some states at that time (such as Massachusetts) there were strict laws against travel on the Christian Sabbath, so that if the President was in another state that did not allow Sunday travel, he would not be prevented from being able to get back to the Capital to sign the veto within the ten day period. Apparently even Presidents were not immune to prosecution for violation of such laws. In fact, the *Columbian Sentinel* of December 1789 reported that just such a fate befell President George Washington when he decided to travel through Massachusetts on a Sunday.

e. Note that the Constitution does not prohibit the President from doing any official business, work, travel, or recreation on Sundays (which it would have done had those who ratified the Constitution intended to officially declare Sunday to be nationally observed and recognized as the Christian Sabbath, for those States that did have strict Sabbath laws did articulate to some degree what was prohibited on the Christian Sabbath). Thus, this exclusion of Sundays within the ten day period that the President has to sign a veto is not

officially declaring Sunday to be the Christian Sabbath or officially declaring the United States to be a Christian nation.

3. One last argument proposed by those who believe the Constitution to be a Christian document and believe the United States to be a Christian nation is that it was not necessary to declare the nation to be Christian, for such was already the declaration in nearly all of the State Constitutions at that time.

a. Although it is true that nearly all of the State Constitutions at that time officially recognized Christianity, the National Constitution's omission of God, Christ, Christianity, and the holy Scripture was not a way of officially recognizing Christianity by mere deference to the State Constitutions. For as was said in previous sermons, whether to include God, Christ, Christianity, or the Bible in the Federal Constitution was in fact debated through the ratification process at the State level and at the Constitutional Convention, and all such references were intentionally omitted from the Federal Constitution (not because Christianity was already mentioned in the State Constitutions, but because the founders decided against the establishment of any particular religion and decided against the prohibition of any particular religion). In fact, though the Federal Constitution did not disallow States from officially recognizing Christianity, by its intentional refusal to do so, the Federal Constitution was setting the course upon which all of the States would subsequently follow in conforming their State Constitutions to that of the Federal Constitution.

b. As already noted, there is not only an omission of the official recognition of the Christian religion in the Federal Constitution, there is also the official recognition of all religions (polytheism) or no religion at all (atheism). Furthermore, the Treaty of Tripoli of 1797 was unanimously signed by the U.S. Senate and by the President, and states in Article 11, "As the Government of the United States of America is not, in any sense, founded on the Christian religion . . ." (which necessarily

implies that the U.S. Constitution is not in any sense a Christian document).

B. Dear ones, all those religious and political leaders that seek to take us back to some alleged Christian Constitution which allegedly declares this nation to be a Christian nation are taking us back to see the origin of our national sins, in refusing to officially include in the Constitution the Triune God as the One who has established civil government as His ordinance and civil magistrates as His ministers to do His will for His glory, in refusing to officially include in the Constitution Jesus Christ as having dominion over all rulers and nations as King of kings and Lord of lords, in refusing to officially include in the Constitution biblical Christianity as the only religion of the nation, in refusing to officially include in the Constitution the Moral Law of God as the supreme law of the land, and in refusing to officially include in the Constitution as a requirement an oath of office that affirms all of the above. To the contrary, the Constitution officially declares the United States to be nation that has many gods and many religions. Dear ones, we must see that the wrath of God abides upon us as a nation because we ought to be a Christian nation (in accordance with the Solemn League and Covenant), but we have rejected the Lord and His Christ (Psalm 9:17). There is only blessing promised by the Lord to that nation whose God is owned to be the Triune Lord and Jehovah of the Bible (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) according to Psalm 33:12.

Copyright 2010 Greg L. Price. Distributed by Still Waters Revival Books (<http://www.swrb.com>) by permission of the author, Greg L. Price. More free online written Reformation resources by Greg Price (John Calvin, John Knox, Samuel Rutherford, et al.) are at <http://www.swrb.com/newslett/newslett.htm> and more free audio (MP3) Reformation resources by Greg Price (and many other Puritans, Covenanters, and Reformers) are at <http://www.sermonaudio.com/go/699> or at <http://www.sermonaudio.com/swrb>.