

## God's Desire: A Holy Nation

Joe Fuiten, Bible Teacher, July 7, 2024

Is God interested in nations or only in individuals? In a great many evangelical churches in recent years there has been a wholesale abandonment of the idea that God works within and through nations in particular ways. In those churches, it is all about evangelism with any sense of discipling the nations virtually lost. In some churches it has become so severe they no longer even allow voter registration in the church. The question I am asking is what does God think about that and more broadly is God's desire of a "holy nation" still in force.

Many church leaders have abandoned a national model in their theology of kingdom. In doing so, they have abandoned centuries of Christian thought. Indeed, they have abandoned centuries of Christian thought in America. My concern is that such leaders could never have produced a nation such as America had they not been born into it. They are coasting on a previous generation's energy and investment. Like the prodigal, they are progressively cashing in their inheritance and will leave nothing behind for the next generation. By their omissions, such leaders are diminishing America.

In this session I want to establish three things. First, that God designed the concept of a holy nation in the Old Testament. Second, "Holy Nation" was retained in the New Testament. Third, American Christians and America's founders envisioned America as a fulfillment of that concept for our nation.

I want to begin with the Apostle Peter's audience in 1 Peter 1. He begins his epistle like this: "*Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To God's elect, strangers in the world, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia, 2 who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood....*" He was writing to Christians who were chosen for obedience to Jesus Christ. This was no longer Judaism. This was Christianity. This was no longer Old Testament. This was New Testament Christianity.

He gets down to it in chapter two when he writes (1 Peter 2:9-17) "*But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. 10 Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. 11 Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. 12 Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us. 13 Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king, as the supreme authority, 14 or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. 15 For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men. 16 Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God. 17 Show proper respect to everyone: Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honor the king.*

In this passage, it is clear that Peter is building the New Testament church squarely on the Old Testament concepts. Who are the chosen people? The Jews. Yet Peter uses that language for the church. Who was the holy nation? It was Israel. Yet now Peter uses that language to apply to members of the Roman Empire who happened to be Christians. He deals with them on a personal level. That would be verses 11-12.

After dealing with personal morality, Peter starts talking about government. He defines the role of government in rewarding good and punishing evil. I would point out that an Apostle is defining the role of government. It is not other people, secular people, defining government. The spiritual leader is saying what government should do. I suppose some would say that Church leaders should not be involved in politics. Yet Peter here, and Paul in Romans 13, define the proper role of government. Paul even goes so far as to say that government authorities are God's servants.<sup>1</sup> We sometimes call ministers "God's servants" but Paul uses that term for government.

I have long asked my fellow preachers and church leaders a question. Does your theology include government? Do you inform government what it should do? Peter and Paul did. If you adopt the idea that as a church leader you are only going to be concerned with saving souls and are not going to get involved in politics, do you see that you are not following the Apostolic pattern. I think there is biblical evidence that both Paul and John were politically active. I have a chapter on that in my book The Revenge of Ephesus. In America today, the most fundamental debate is over the role of government. The Apostles spoke to that issue in their day, why shouldn't church leaders do the same in our day?

Peter also defines the Christian's relationship to government. He says that what we are to the government is part of our testimony. We put pagans and foolish people to silence by that relationship. We like to say that they will know we are Christians by our love but Peter here says they will know we are Christians also by our relationship to the government. Peter would not accept the idea that it is better not to be involved in politics and just concentrate on loving people and leading them to the Lord.

Let's take this passage out of Peter and put it back into its Old Testament context. Peter sounds a lot like God at Mt. Sinai before the law was given. (Exodus 19:3-6) "*Then Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain and said, "This is what you are to say to the house of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: 4'You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. 5 Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, 6 you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.'* These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites."

In a world of nations, God wanted Israel to be a holy nation. There was to be something special about that nation. They were to be obedient to God. For his part God promised economic blessings and defined borders. (Deut 28:9-11) "*The LORD will*

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<sup>1</sup> Romans 13:6-7. *This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing.*

*establish you as his holy people, as he promised you on oath, if you keep the commands of the LORD your God and walk in his ways. 10 Then all the peoples on earth will see that you are called by the name of the LORD, and they will fear you. 11 The LORD will grant you abundant prosperity — in the fruit of your womb, the young of your livestock and the crops of your ground — in the land he swore to your forefathers to give you.”*

In the Old Testament, when God said Israel would be a holy nation, he had in mind their economy, their land, and their governance. In short, it would be all the things that define a nation. This wasn't just a spiritual kingdom of the heart. This was to be an actual kingdom with a particular relationship with God. They would be a nation among the nations.

In our recent study of Daniel we found that God sees the world in terms of kingdoms. There are the earthly kingdoms which will be superseded by Christ's earthly rule. Israel was to be the example of God's rule on the earth as the “holy nation.” The Christians Peter described in 1 Peter were also to be that exemplary holy nation.

Peter described New Testament Christians as being “*a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.*” He was incorporating by reference, the Old Testament concepts. This is not replacement theology as some teach. Rather it is continuity with the past. It is God bringing the same concepts forward into the church.

We have covered the first two points. First, that God designed the concept of a holy nation in the Old Testament. Second, that it was retained in the New Testament. Now I want to turn to the third idea, that American Christians and America's founders envisioned America as a fulfillment of that concept for our nation. This will be a recurrent theme in this series of studies.

You see it from the very beginning. The Pilgrims were quite explicit in their goals in the Virginia Charter. “*Having undertaken for the Glory of God, and Advancement of the Christian Faith, and the Honor of our King and Country, a voyage to plant the first colony in the northern parts of Virginia....*” The connection between God and Country was deep.

Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, “*You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid. Nor do men light a lamp and put it under a bushel, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.*”

The echo of that is found in the words of the Pilgrim leader John Winthrop in 1630. Aboard the Arbella he said, “*For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill, the eyes of all people are upon us; so that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken, and so cause Him to withdraw His present help from us, we shall shame the faces of many of God's worthy servants, and cause their prayers to be turned into curses . . .*”

That vision has been a mainstay in America since the beginning right up to the present moment. Ronald Reagan said it. “**America is a shining city upon a hill** whose beacon light guides freedom-loving people everywhere.” In his farewell address to added

to it for emphasis “*I've spoken of the Shining City all my political life. ...In my mind it was a tall, proud city built on rocks stronger than oceans, windswept, God-blessed, and teeming with people of all kinds living in harmony and peace; a city with free ports that hummed with commerce and creativity. And if there had to be city walls, the walls had doors and the doors were open to anyone with the will and the heart to get here. That's how I saw it, and see it still.*”

Promised Land imagery figured prominently in shaping English colonial thought. The pilgrims identified themselves with the ancient Hebrews. They viewed the New World as the New Canaan. They were God's chosen people headed for the Promised Land. Other colonists believed they, too, had been divinely called. The settlers in Virginia were, John Rolfe said, “a peculiar people, marked and chosen by the finger of God.” Clearly Peter’s “holy nation” imagery is in mind with these colonials.

This self-image of being God's Chosen People called to establish the New Israel became an integral theme in America's self-interpretation. During the revolutionary period, it emerged with new force. “We cannot but acknowledge that God hath graciously patronized our cause and taken us under his special care, as he did his ancient covenant people,” Samuel Langdon preached at Concord, New Hampshire in 1788. George Washington was the “American Joshua,” and “Never was the possession of arms used with more glory, or in a better cause, since the days of Joshua, the son of Nun,” Ezra Stiles urged in Connecticut in 1783. In 1776, Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson wanted Promised Land images for the new nation's Great Seal. Franklin proposed Moses dividing the Red Sea with Pharaoh's army being overwhelmed by the closing waters. Jefferson urged a representation of the Israelites being led in the wilderness by the pillar of fire by night and the cloud by day. Later, in his second inaugural address (1805), Jefferson again recalled the Promised Land. “I shall need...the favor of that Being in whose hands we are, who led our fathers, as Israel of old, from their native land and planted them in a country flowing with all the necessities and comforts of life.”<sup>2</sup>

When America was founded as a country, the preachers of America were aflame with that idea. They showed they had learned the lesson of the nation Israel who wanted a king like other nations. They created the motto of the American Revolution “No King but Jesus.”

Yale historian Harry S. Stout wrote an article in *Christian History* magazine titled, “Christianity and the American Revolution”. Here is what he said about America at the time of the Revolution:

*Over the span of the colonial era, American ministers delivered approximately 8 million sermons, each lasting one to one-and-a-half hours. The average 70-year-old colonial churchgoer would have listened to some 7,000 sermons in his or her lifetime, totaling nearly 10,000 hours of concentrated listening. This is the number of classroom*

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<sup>2</sup> Conrad Cherry (ed.), *God's New Israel: Religious Interpretations of American Destiny* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1971). The quotations are from this book: Winthrop p. 43; Whitaker p. 33; Rolfe p. 26; Langdon p. 99 ; Stiles p. 88; and Jefferson p. 65. The information about the Great Seal is found on p. 65. See also, Joseph Gaer and Ben Siegal, *The Puritan Heritage: American Roots in the Bible* (New York: A Mentor Book/The New American Library, 1964).

*hours it would take to receive ten separate undergraduate degrees in a modern university, without ever repeating the same course!*

*Events were perceived not from the mundane, human vantage point but from God's. The vast majority of colonists were Reformed or Calvinist, to whom things were not as they might appear at ground level: all events, no matter how mundane or seemingly random, were parts of a larger pattern of meaning, part of God's providential design. The outlines of this pattern were contained in Scripture and interpreted by discerning pastors. - [Today] taxation and representation are political and constitutional issues, having nothing to do with religion. But to eighteenth-century ears, attuned to lifetimes of preaching, the issues were inevitably religious as well.*

*When understood in its own times, the American Revolution was first and foremost a religious event.<sup>3</sup>*

The idea of the expansion of America to the west was a religiously inspired idea. In 1845 an article in the *Democratic Review*, declared that expansion represented “the fulfillment of our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions.”

In various ways, the people who put America together were people who believed in the concept of a holy nation. Because they believed we were a nation with a particular destiny given to us by God, they sought for God’s will to be accomplished. They were not ashamed of the laws required by the Bible.

When you see an American flag in a church facility you are feeling a motivation of every generation of Americans. Indeed, Christians from the beginning have wanted to create societies that were more than just personally Christian. They longed for that holy nation. Today we are in a low ebb of that dream partly because we need a revival in our hearts and partly because church leaders have abandoned the historic vision for America. Indeed, most have little vision for America. An effete church does not give birth to a nation.

We are in times like those of Nehemiah. We must have both the tools of building and the weapons of warfare. (Nehemiah 4:16-18) “*From that day on, half of my men did the work, while the other half were equipped with spears, shields, bows and armor. ... Those who carried materials did their work with one hand and held a weapon in the other, 18 and each of the builders wore his sword at his side as he worked.*” NIV

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<sup>3</sup> Elesha Coffman, Editor of Christian History Magazine, quoting from Vol. 50 of that publication.