

Connections



A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

NUMBER 117 - JULY 2002

BARBARA WENDLAND 505 CHEROKEE DRIVE TEMPLE, TX 76504-3629 254-773-2625 BCWendland@aol.com

Patriotism and Christianity

As I write this my church's choir is rehearsing for a July 4 presentation of Randall Thompson's *The Testament of Freedom*. Its text consists of quotes from the writings of Thomas Jefferson. It's an exciting work that has heightened my appreciation for my country. It has also made me consider how patriotism relates to Christian faith.



Jefferson's words seem especially pertinent in these months after the September 11 attacks that galvanized so many U.S. citizens' devotion to their country. We see evidence of renewed patriotism all around us. Flags are prominently displayed. New books about our nation's founders keep appearing.

Politicians even cooperate with political opponents at times.



News of terrorist attacks and continually escalating violence in other countries has led many of us in the U.S. to new appreciation for our freedom. These events also remind us that our country is no longer isolated from the rest of the world as it was in Jefferson's time. Current events may therefore reveal the need to question some of our previously unquestioned assumptions about our country's ways of functioning. They may show the need for a fresh look at our nation and its history.

A wider focus on history

History as I encountered it in my school years held little interest for me because it was mainly details about wars, treaties, and political parties. Those made my eyes glaze over fast. Eventually, however, I discovered some other aspects of history that I'd been missing, and for me they're its most interesting aspects. When history's focus is not on dates, rulers, and battles but rather on the



Our founders' faith

Many U.S. Christians assume that our founders created the U.S. as a Christian nation. However, the writings of Thomas Jefferson and others of our nation's founders express belief in God but not in Jesus Christ. Jefferson apparently believed that Jesus' teachings had unique value as a moral code, but he didn't accept the Christian claim that Jesus was divine.



Like several others of our founders, Jefferson was a deist rather than a Christian. And others of our nation's founders were unitarians, not believers in the Christian doctrine of the trinity.

Patriotism and Christianity can differ

Seventeenth and eighteenth century deists saw God's nature and existence revealed by the law-abiding natural world and the rational operation of the universe, not by Jesus Christ or sacred scripture. Early American patriot



Thomas Paine, a deist, wrote, "The creation is the Bible of the true believer in God."

Our Declaration of Independence reflects the deist view. It speaks of the U.S. being like the other "powers of the earth" in having "the separate but equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them."

If we equate Christianity with patriotism and loyalty to our nation, we misrepresent not only Christianity but also some principles on which our nation was established. Our nation's founders wanted to guarantee religious freedom. Their aim wasn't to create a nation designed only for Christians.



ideas and beliefs that have been the catalysts for events, history comes alive for me. When I learn about leaders' personal lives and see how their experiences influenced their public actions, history takes on new interest. When I look at trends in thought, and their relation to developments in religion, the arts, the sciences, and technology, I recognize history as much more than politics and battles.



Applying that wider focus not only to the history of the U.S. and the wider world, but also to current events, makes me wonder about some aspects of the patriotism that is most obvious in the U.S. in times of war and on July 4.

Asking the questions is important

Many people see questioning any of our nation's actions as disloyalty and as failure to appreciate its unique and valuable features. To these Americans, even considering more than one view on controversial issues seems unacceptable. Many church members have a similar attitude toward questioning church doctrines and policies or suggesting that familiar Bible passages may have more than one valid interpretation. I think asking such questions is important, however, for both the church and the world. We need to ask the questions if we want to be both faithful Christians and loyal citizens.

For me as an appreciative U.S. citizen and as a Christian, singing Jefferson's words recently has brought to my mind some questions that I therefore invite you to consider with me. I hope that giving them fresh consideration can help us discern what God wants from us today as U.S. Christians.



■ What kind of liberty?

"The God who gave us life gave us liberty at the same time," says Jefferson (*A Summary View of the Rights of British America*, 1774). But I wonder if God wants us to have as much liberty as we'd like.

Things that we want to be true are easy to believe, and Jefferson's statement is in that category. Such beliefs tend to be the ones that we most need to question. So we need to ask some questions about the freedom that we claim as God-given.

I suspect that God wants our freedom to be limited in ways that will promote the best interests of other individuals and of the nations and communities of faith we're part of. I doubt, for example, that God wants us to be consuming the high proportion of the world's resources that we now consume. I doubt that going to war to insure access to all the oil we want is God's will or is even in "our national interest" as we claim.

Woe to those who join house to house, who add field to field ...
—Isaiah 5:8

You shall love the Lord your God ... You shall love your neighbor as yourself ... There is no other commandment greater than these.
—Mark 12:29-31

The kind of liberty God intends for us seems to be a liberty that is balanced with sharing God-given resources—with accepting responsibility for meeting our neighbors' needs. God-given liberty carries the responsibility for defending

the weak and seeing that minority views get a hearing. It promotes justice. It's not the freedom to have or to do all that we happen to want.

In addition, the kind of liberty God has given us includes the freedom—the obligation, in fact—to express disagreement with the majority's pattern and to refuse to conform to it, when it differs from what God wants. We may claim that kind of liberty for ourselves, but we don't always want everyone else to have it.



In a royal chapel in England last month during a worship service celebrating the Queen's jubilee, I was surprised to hear the Anglican preacher replace "liberty" with "unity" when he quoted the biblical description of a jubilee (Leviticus 25:10). Yet in our thinking, some of us make this kind of change often. We're uncomfortable believing that God-given freedom might include the freedom to dissent or to be different from the majority. So we assume that God wants unity instead of liberty, and by unity we too often mean silent, unquestioning conformity.

■ Whose property?

Owning property is another right that Jefferson refers to and that many of us take for granted. Throughout

The earth is the Lord's, and all that is in it ...
—Psalm 24:1

my life I've been fortunate enough to have a good bit of property, so I want to believe that having it is good or at least is permissible in God's view. Many other U.S. citizens, including a lot of church members, also seem to consider that belief sacred. To most

of us, being allowed to own property, as long as we don't get it illegally, seems reasonable and fair at the very least. Yet I'm not aware of any scripture that says owning property is a God-given right. God may not forbid owning property, but several passages in the Bible portray it as a hindrance to doing God's will.

Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven ... For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

—Luke 12:33-34

■ **Faithfulness or arrogance?**

In Jefferson's writings that furnish the text for *The Testament of Freedom*, what raises the biggest question in my mind is the allusion to our having received God's divine favor—having been called to be God's unique instrument as a nation. "Even should the cloud of barbarism and despotism again obscure the science and liberties of Europe, this country remains to preserve and restore light and liberty to them," says Jefferson. "The flames kindled



on the 4th of July, 1776, have spread over too much of the globe to be extinguished by the feeble engines of despotism; on the contrary, they will consume these engines and all who work them."

Can we legitimately assume that the U.S.A. is uniquely called by God to "restore light and liberty" to the other countries of the world? I'm not sure.

The U.S. and Europe are the only parts of the world that Jefferson explicitly mentions in the quotes above. And if Jefferson saw the U.S. and Europe as the only civilized parts of the world, that's not surprising, of course, given the state of communication and transportation in his time. But can we still assume that our God-given calling is to take light to the rest of the world?



Today we also try to "restore light and liberty," or even to introduce them, to countries in Asia and Africa. We tend to ignore the centuries-old wisdom that some of their cultures and religions include. Yet those cultures apparently include some wisdom that ours lacks. Maybe our concern needs to be less for enlightening other countries and more for recognizing the important features that any nation (including ours) can lose if it lets a dictator or a radical or fundamentalist group destroy its civilization's most distinctive and most valuable features.



When we assume that God calls us to enlighten other countries, we need to be cautious for another reason, too. That assumption may be mere arrogance rather than accurate discernment of God's will.

You are the light of the world. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand ... In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your [God].
—Matthew 5:15-16

On the other hand, if God calls each person to a ministry that uses that person's unique combination of God-given talents, spiritual gifts, and other resources, as

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I'm a United Methodist lay woman, and neither a church employee nor a clergyman's wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Some readers make voluntary financial contributions, but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all 50 states, D.C., and Puerto Rico—laity and clergy in at least 12 church denominations and some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I believe our churches need to address.

Christians believe, isn't it likely that God also does something similar in calling nations? And if God calls and empowers occasional individuals—Moses and Paul, for example—to serve in key leadership roles at especially crucial times, might not God also call certain nations to fill key leadership roles at crucial times in history? Christians and Jews believe God did that with the nation of Israel in the centuries described in the Hebrew Bible. Might not God be similarly calling the U.S. to a unique leadership role today?



I'm not sure. It's dangerous and probably unrealistic as well, to get the idea that our side is God's

side and our enemies are God's enemies. And it's hard to see our nation as God's spokesperson or agent without mistakenly seeing it as faultless or at least as superior to all other nations in every way.

Real patriotism asks the hard questions

**We must obey God
rather than any
human authority.**
—Acts 5:29

I hope that as we salute our flag and sing patriotic songs on July 4 we'll remember that although patriotism is valuable, blind support for all our nation's actions and policies can conflict with obeying God. It can also harm our nation.

Barbara



“The God who gave us life gave us liberty at the same time; the hand of force may destroy but cannot disjoin them.”

“Honor, justice, and humanity forbid us tamely to surrender that freedom which we received from our gallant ancestors, and which our innocent posterity have a right to receive from us.”

— Thomas Jefferson

