

America and the One True Church: What My Church Taught Me about My Country

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Precious few Americans outside the South know much about my church—the Church of Christ—and that’s a shame, since it illumines so well the character of the American nation. Because my church is relatively small (c. 1 million members) and relatively regional with most of its members in four southern states—Tennessee, Arkansas, Oklahoma, and Texas—some will doubtless scoff at my claim that it illumines the character of the larger nation. And who can blame them? After all, one eminent historian, David Edwin Harrell Jr., wrote some fifty years ago that my church was filled with “the spirited offspring of the religious red necks of the post-bellum South.”

He might well have added that, until the 1970s, members of this largely white church were a provincial people, deeply committed to the values of the plain folk (read: white, lower-middle class Protestants) of the American South. They therefore harbored deep suspicions of northerners, Catholics, and liberals, not to mention Communists, until long after the death of the former Soviet Union. When I was in graduate school, for example, doing master’s level work at one of the schools related to my church in the mid-1960s, and considering doctoral work at Penn, Princeton, Columbia, or Iowa, many in my church told me that if I went to one of those northern schools to do my Ph.D., I would no doubt lose my faith.

The undergraduate institution I attended—also related to my church—was academically strong in many respects but also widely

noted for the constant stream of anti-Communist propaganda manufactured by its president and a satellite organization that he headed. During my sophomore year, I grew convinced that the Kremlin had my college on its radar screen and had planted a spy on its faculty. I finally concluded that a history professor known for his moderately Democratic politics was doubtless a Communist double agent.

By the 1970s, the Church of Christ was breaking out of its provincial cocoon, thanks in part to the power of the cultural revolution of the 1960s, but thanks as well to the love of biblical learning so deeply rooted in this church—a love that prompted scores of young people in the Church of Christ to complete doctorates in biblical studies at places like Harvard, Yale, and Chicago in the 1970s, 1980s, and beyond. The extent to which this church has shattered its cultural cocoon can be illustrated by Max Lucado, a Church of Christ preacher who has become America's best known evangelical author of inspirational literature; by Jack Scott, who recently retired as chancellor of the California Community College System, the largest higher-education system in the world; by Robert M. Randolph, chaplain at MIT who regularly works with students from Muslim, Buddhist, Jewish, Christian, and other traditions; by Larry James, CEO of CitySquare in Dallas, Texas, one of America's most vibrant and ecumenically supported inner-city missions; by Shaun Casey, professor of ethics at Wesley Theological Seminary, who in 2008 coordinated President Obama's outreach to evangelical voters; or by Greg Sterling, newly installed dean of the Yale Divinity School.

Restoring the One True Church

And yet this church, so regional and so parochial in so many ways for so many years, also typically claimed for most of those years that it was the one true and universal church outside of which there could be no salvation. Outsiders quickly discern the irony when a culturally-bound religious organization like mine makes such a universal—and utterly fantastic—claim. But insiders virtually never perceive that irony, and their failure of perception is crucial to maintaining the myth.

My experience as a teenager in the Church of Christ beautifully illustrates how completely the myth of the one true church

can swallow its adherents and dull their critical sensibilities. In the late 1950s, I seriously wondered why the major television networks devoted so much coverage to what the Vatican said about this or that global crisis, but never covered the perspectives of the leading preachers in the Church of Christ. After all, if we were the one true church, our preachers deserved fully as much coverage as the networks gave the Vatican, and probably even more.

I should add that growing up in Texas helped to sustain my provincial view of the world and therefore my true-church mentality. My parents, eager for my brother and me to know something about our state, took us each spring to some important Texas destination—the Alamo in San Antonio, for example, or the battleship *Texas* in LaPorte, or Big Bend National Park. But for all our travel in the Lone Star State, I had never been outside of Texas until I was eighteen years old, except for a brief family trip to New Mexico.

In the spring of my senior year in high school, my parents and I visited St. Louis, where we stayed in a large downtown hotel. The first morning there my dad asked if I would like to take a walk, just to see the sights in downtown St. Louis. I shall never forget my shock when I saw people—hundreds of them—walking down those sidewalks. Intellectually I suppose I knew that there were people in St. Louis. But at a deep, emotional level, I had never really considered the fact that there were people outside of Texas. Nor had any adult I knew encouraged me to consider that possibility. Instead, most Texans believed at a basic, primal level that our state was the center of the universe—a conviction that I absorbed by osmosis. The fact that I lived at the *axis mundi*—at the world's center point—sustained my true-church mentality.

The very first crack in my true-church armor came during my college years when I no longer lived at the center of the universe but in an outlying wasteland that bordered on the *axis mundi*—the state of Arkansas. And my remove from the *axis mundi* allowed me to consider for the very first time a profoundly subversive truth. One day a college friend told me that our church was essentially confined to four southern states—Tennessee, Arkansas, Oklahoma, and Texas. As insular as I was, it still made no sense to me that all God's children—all the saved from throughout the

earth—were essentially confined to four states in the American South.

But what does any of this have to do with the character of the American nation? The answer to that question begins to emerge when we consider the one crucial factor that is common to virtually all true-church movements—their denial of history, or at least their rejection of any history except their own. And sometimes, as was the case with my church, they deny even *their own* history, fearful that admitting to their status as historical actors might relativize their identity as the one true church.

In the case of our church, one single concept both defined us and provided the reason for our existence, and that was the concept of “*restoration*.” We believed that soon after the days of Jesus and the apostles—and certainly with the emergence of the pope in Rome—corruption had so completely invaded the church that the true church of Jesus Christ had been lost to the earth.

We also believed that our forebears on the nineteenth-century American frontier had restored the one true church.

We weren’t the only ones embracing that conviction; Mormons, who grew up alongside Churches of Christ on the nineteenth-century American frontier, made the very same claim. And though Mormons and Churches of Christ quarreled with each other over which tradition had restored the one true church, the restorationist agenda comprised the heart and soul of both traditions.

For our part, we finally came to believe that the Church of Christ in remote and God-forsaken places like Muleshoe or Cut and Shoot, Texas, was identical in every essential detail with the churches the apostles established in places like Jerusalem or Corinth or Rome some 2,000 years ago. Further, we believed that the intervening history of the church from that time to this—the history of Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, and Calvin, for example—was inconsequential at best, and dangerous at worst, and therefore better ignored.

The American Nation: Restoring Nature’s “Self-Evident Truths”

Thus it was with the larger nation as well. Patriots in this Republic firmly believed that the new American nation had restored to the earth the virtues that had prevailed in the Garden of Eden

at the beginning of time, but had been lost, obscured, and corrupted, thanks to a succession of totalitarian regimes and, yes, thanks to the Roman Church as well. We catch a glimpse of the way those earliest patriots heralded this new nation as a restoration of Eden when we hear Thomas Paine, perhaps the chief propagandist for the American Revolution, exult that “the case and circumstance of America present themselves as in the beginning of the world.” Of the new American government, Paine concluded that “we are brought at once to the point of seeing government begin, as if we had lived in the beginning of time.” John Adams added that “the United States of America have exhibited, perhaps, the first example of governments erected on the simple principles of nature.”

If we wish to see this vision portrayed in graphic form, we need only consult the back side of the Great Seal of the United States. There we encounter an unfinished pyramid bearing the date of 1776—an image that clearly represents the United States. That pyramid grows from an arid and barren landscape that represents the failures of virtually all of human history prior to the founding of America. Above the pyramid we find the eye of God looking down with approval on this restoration of the virtues of Eden. Above the eye of God is the Latin phrase *annuit coeptis*, “He has smiled on our beginnings,” and beneath the pyramid is the phrase that explains the meaning of America: *novus ordo seclorum*, or “a new order of the ages.”

Here was a nation, therefore, untouched by the hand of human tradition, a nation unformed by the molding power of history, a nation that had sprung, as it were, directly from the hand of God, just as the Church of Christ in Little Rock, Memphis, or Dallas had sprung directly from that very first church, established by Jesus’ apostles in the ancient city of Jerusalem. This was a utopian vision on steroids—a vision informed by that golden age that stood at the dawn of time. Further, the utopian impulse that drove the nation also helped create both the Mormon church and the Church of Christ. Indeed, one could make a convincing case that apart from the restorationist agenda of the American nation, these two churches might never have emerged.

The difference, of course, was that the Church of Christ—and

Mormons, too, for that matter—operated in a specifically Christian arena, appealing to Christian scripture and to Jesus and the apostles. On the other hand, the earliest American patriots grounded the nation’s identity not in the Bible or Jesus and the apostles, but in “Nature and Nature’s God,” to borrow Jefferson’s phrase from the *Declaration of Independence*. In truth, Jefferson’s appeal to “nature” was clearly an appeal to the birth of the world and the creation of the human race, and on that restorationist agenda the Founders built the American nation.

In spite of their differences, therefore, both the Church of Christ and the larger American nation constructed their respective identities from that time-before-time, that golden age that thrived before the Fall. Further, the American nation, like the Church of Christ, has never had much use for history. Most Americans live their lives in the eternal now and view history as irrelevant to anything that really matters. Henry Ford summarized the American bias against history when he famously proclaimed that “history is bunk.”

And that perspective—“history is bunk”—always stands at the heart of the true-church mentality. It also stands at the heart of the terrible irony that finally came to define both the Church of Christ and the larger American nation. For both the church and the nation imagined themselves the universal ark of salvation for all humankind, but finally rejected—sometimes with violence—some of those they once had hoped to save.

In its earliest years, the Church of Christ actively promoted an ecumenical vision. The restored Church of Jesus Christ, it firmly believed, would provide the basis for the unity of all Christians. But when other Christians resisted that vision and refused to flow into the ecumenical ark the Church of Christ had provided, that church—against all empirical evidence to the contrary—slowly began to transform itself from its original ecumenical posture into the one true church outside of which there could be no salvation. In this scenario, other so-called Christians—Presbyterians, Baptists, Catholics, and the lot—would simply be damned to the fires of eternal hell.

Likewise, the American nation imagined itself from an early date as the beacon of hope for the world. That vision explains why the pyramid on the Great Seal of the United States remains unfin-

ished. The pyramid would be completed only when other nations around the globe would emulate the American example, throw off the yoke of dictatorial regimes, and claim for themselves the divine gift of freedom. Thus the famous minister Lyman Beecher proclaimed in 1835 that “nation after nation cheered by our example, will follow in our footsteps, till the whole earth is free.” But when nation after nation refused to follow in our footsteps, the United States exchanged the power of example for the power of the sword, thereby embracing the terribly ironic posture of compelling others to be free—a phenomenon the world has witnessed time and again, first in the Philippines but more recently in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan.

Further, when the nation judged others incapable of freedom on American terms, it enslaved them. And when it determined that some of those “others” were impediments to the American march toward freedom, it launched a war of extermination and eradicated the vast majority of native people from the face of the continent. In this way, “the nation with the soul of a church,” as Sidney E. Mead so aptly expressed it, transformed itself into the nation with the soul of a sect, or perhaps more appropriately phrased, the nation with the soul of the one true church.

In the face of such devastating ironies, one question begs to be answered: how could all this be? How could a provincial church from the American South seriously imagine itself the one true church outside of which there could be no salvation? And how could a provincial nation, global in some respects but severely constrained by geography, language, culture, religion, and political commitments—how could such a nation seriously imagine itself the ark of redemption for all the world? Part of the answer surely lies—as we have seen—in the way both church and nation grounded their identities in a mythic golden age before the Fall and thereby refused to view themselves as the products of history.

The other part of the answer lies in a philosophical perspective that seized the popular imagination in America during the time of the nation’s founding—a perspective known as Scottish Common Sense Realism. Human beings quite naturally view the world through provincial eyes, and therefore typically place themselves at the center of the universe. Common Sense Realism rein-

forced that tendency by denying that history and culture shape our perceptions of the world in which we live. We therefore know the world as it really is and not the world filtered through our own unique perceptions. The obvious upshot of that conviction is that we all can see the world alike, a notion reflected in that pregnant phrase in the *Declaration of Independence*: “We hold these truths to be self-evident.” What seemed “self-evident” to Thomas Jefferson, author of the *Declaration*, was that all white (not black or red or brown) men (not women) with property (not the poor) were “created equal” and “endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights.”

Armed with the conviction that we can all see the world alike, both the Church of Christ and the American nation saw their provincial experiences as universal norms. And they did that in spite of the fact that they genuinely sought to conform themselves, not to the corrupted, fallen world of their own time and place, but to the world as it was in that first golden age—Eden in the case of America and the primitive church in the case of the Church of Christ. To discern the shape of that ideal world, the nation peered deeply into the well of nature, even as the Church of Christ peered deeply into the well of Christian scripture and antiquity.

Ironically, however, both nation and church found themselves seduced by what they saw at the bottom of their respective wells, namely, their own reflections. And mistaking those reflections for universal norms, they consigned all those who refused to see the world in the very same way to the fires of hell, in the case of the church, or to slavery, extermination, or coercion, in the case of the nation.

The fact of the matter is this—that the United States, like my own Church of Christ, brings to the table of the world some extraordinary gifts. But to share these gifts with others, both must take some important steps. In recent years, my church has begun to renounce its long-standing claim that it alone is the one true church, recognize the legitimacy of other Christian traditions, and join hands with other Christians to do the work the church was called to do. But to make meaningful progress on all these fronts, the Church of Christ must take seriously its distinctly American history and confess that it is not a one-to-one re-cre-

ation of the church that Jesus' apostles established some 2,000 years ago.

Likewise, for the American nation to realize its potential to bless the world in incalculable ways, this nation must abandon the myth of American exceptionalism and begin to take seriously its status as a nation among nations, created not by the hand of God but by the trajectory of history. It must exchange the power of the sword for the power of example and embrace the fact that freedom in its fullest sense finally means freedom for all human beings to be true to themselves, true to their cultures, and true to the arc of their own particular histories.

But that is a point forever lost on any religion that imagines itself "the one true church," and a point that will be lost on this nation as well, so long as Americans imagine that their country simply reflects those "self-evident truths" that point to the way God meant for things to be.