

14 Days of Nation-Building

Part 1

“Me? A Politician?”

I'm David Rowe, Co-pastor of the Greenfield Hill Congregational Church in Fairfield, Connecticut. And this begins a 14 part series on what the Bible teaches about being a nation and a citizen.

In 1966 I was kicked out of Colgate University before landing, fortunately, at Hofstra. My academic revival began with a Political Science course. It was an eye-opening learning experience. Before that course, my idea of government was that it was what people above your pay grade did to you.

At 19, in the mid-60s, the purpose of government was to take my fun away. The government could be Colgate, or my parents, or my fraternity, or our nation. At every level of my existence there was an attempt to govern me. I responded by resisting being governed. By 1966 that wasn't working for me.

The Political Science course opened up the possibility that government could be “of the people, by the people, for the people.” Gee, where had I heard that before?

A lifetime later I've put pen to paper to think through government, nation, and citizenship, with a close eye on what the Bible can teach us.

The project started with an unrelated thought, while trying to conjure up a sermon. I said to myself, if God was going to start a religion... then I realized, well, God *did*! Even by Judeo-Christian standards alone, God set four religions in motion: Judaism, Catholicism, Orthodox Christianity, and Protestantism. Then I thought, if God was going to start a family... well, God *did*, at least two, officially: Adam and Eve; and the Holy Family of Mary, Joseph, and Jesus.

Finally, I thought, what if God was going to start a nation...? Bingo! That is essentially two-thirds of the whole Bible, the Old Testament history of Israel from day one.

That gave me a starting point. But it was too much for a sermon, no one wants a sermon with fourteen points. And the daily devotional format is too brief. I needed each one to be long enough to be clear, but short enough for you to endure. We settled on a multi-platform plan: a podcast, in print, and by e-mail.

In the weeks ahead, through 14 episodes, we'll consider what the Bible says about kings, pro and con; what Jesus meant when he told us to give to Caesar what we owe to Caesar; how immigration ties ancient Iraq to our little church on top of the hill; what Saints Paul and Peter meant when they tell us to obey authorities no matter what; and what of those, like Daniel, who stand up to a government no matter what? What do we mean when we sing our most patriotic

hymns, like “America, the Beautiful” and “My Country ‘Tis of Thee”? And when people compare the President to King Cyrus and another to the Antichrist, or a citizen to a slave, or a nation to a divine “Covenant” – what does that mean for us?

OK – let's start! Here's Day One:

Me? A Politician??

I ran for elected office, once. It was one of the stupidest things I've ever done.

I was pastor of a church in upstate New York, a volunteer wrestling coach, we had an active youth ministry. As a result, people urged me to run for the School Board. Should I list my mistakes?

First, each candidate wrote a statement of beliefs, a sort of platform to be printed in the local paper, back in the day when local papers had clout. Among my obvious explanations for running, I stated that the school band and the science classes were as important as the football team. Oh, boy! I got pegged as the “anti-sports candidate.”

Second, I knew nothing. I had been a lousy student, I was the father of two little kids not yet in school, I had zero experience in politics. I knew nothing. When the League of Women Voters hosted a School Board Candidates night, my ignorance was in lavender. For one question I was asked my opinion of “Quinn Mester”, and I honestly admitted I have never met him nor read him. It turned out that “Quinmester” is an educational term for year-round schooling.

This disaster ended in humiliating defeat: I think I came in 12th out of eight candidates. My own church wouldn't vote for me.

I mention this only to highlight my respect for any person who offers themselves for public service in government. It has always been a thankless task; and in recent years has become a contentious and hostile and even dangerous task.

Prostitution has been humorously called “the world's oldest profession.” I doubt it. It was certainly politics, governance. From the first moment a few humans gathered as some form of community (family, clan, tribe) someone had to lead. Perhaps they grabbed hold of leadership. Or they got it by popular acclaim. But they couldn't just sit in a cave in the dark, endlessly wondering what to do. Someone became the first decider-in-chief, the first community organizer, the first governor – one who governs.

Eons went by as people tried various groupings, from tribes to city states to nations. With a nation came boundaries, identity, loyalty. And soon, a host of practicalities: defense, infrastructure, law. Before you knew it, there were schools and firefighters, police and water treatment, public health and senior centers, welfare and warfare.

And a little thing called “taxes”.

Wrap it all with a flag-colored bow and you have a nation.

Our nation, these United States, we are almost 250 years old. Compared to the nations created out of the post-World War II and post-colonial euphoria across Africa and Asia, we are old. Compared to old Europe, and the legendary nations of Biblical times, we are young.

We are young enough to still be learning. We are old enough to know better about a lot of things.

Which leads to this loftily titled “14 Days of Nation Building”. What does the Bible say about government, leadership, nation, and citizenship? As you and I think about this the Bible is a good place to start. It has been thinking about such things for a long time beginning at the beginning – which is what “Genesis” means in the first place.

The Bible’s history of nation and government focused on what we know as Israel and Judaism, with occasional insights into nearby countries like Egypt, Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome. From their own experiences and their interactions with others, we can form opinions about God's intention for good government and good leaders. And we add in surprising lessons from Jesus and Paul when they weigh in on nationhood and citizenship.

Long before Americans boasted of “American Exceptionalism”, Israelites boasted of being “The Promised Land”. Probably every nation is birthed in such enthusiasm and optimism. You can't reasonably start the nation, or any great endeavor, without a sense of destiny, purpose, even calling.

A great hymn refers to “time, like an ever-rolling stream” (*O God, Our Help in Ages Past*). We, the living of 2025, entered the stream of America's time, each in our own way and place and time. We are nation-builders.