

Nation-Building, #6

Liking America

Hello! and welcome. You've found your way to this 14-part series on nation-building, especially on "what does the Bible teach about governance, citizenship, and leadership?"

I'm David Rowe, co-pastor of the Greenfield Hill Congregational Church in Fairfield, Connecticut, and thank you for thinking along with me. It's been fun to consider, and fun to write, because it's really important stuff: being a good citizen, having good government, finding good leaders. We've done five episodes so far. This one is a sort of summary and re-intro to how it came about. I actually preached this episode as a sermon, so it may sound more preacher-like. Also, we have our first music to lead us in and lead us out by my good friend David White.

Seven years ago, I called upon our church to plan for our 300th anniversary. I knew from day one it overlapped with our nation's 250th anniversary. There you have it. church and state, dare I say, made in heaven, or at least perfectly timed. As a result, it was just as natural for me to be thinking about America, specifically, what does it mean to be a nation, to be a citizen? Our church is 50 years older than America. Our spiritual ancestors, those intrepid and dour and visionary pilgrims and Puritans, those hardy New Englanders of fame and infamy, lovers of freedom and rigidity, they were hard at work 150 years before America came to be. So it was the people of a town like this one and a church like ours, those were the people who sat around taverns like the one that used to be next door to our church and sat around wood stoves in winter and front porches in summer and feed stores down an old post road. That's where they talked and grumbled and wondered, sowing seeds of doubt rebellion, insurrection, treason, revolution, sowing seeds of America. It is easy to imagine a coffee hour out there on the front lawn of our church in 1725 or a potluck supper in 1741, a group of people standing around before church out on the green in 1758, local farmers and landowners and slaves and indentured servants, old-time townsfolk and new.

Newly arrived immigrants talking about unfair taxes, arrogant kings, brutal military occupiers, injustice, starting to think out loud, maybe whispers at first, but getting louder, bolder, thinking about what it would be to be, be what? Be free, okay? No king. We'll stand on our own. We'll take care of ourselves. No longer English. No longer anybody else's.

America loves to talk about the founding fathers. We love our Ben Franklin, Alexander Hamilton, Thomas Jefferson heroes. We love the heroic images of legendary men signing historic documents, our Bill of Rights, our Declaration of Independence, our Constitution, almost holy writ, America's defining scripture. But it didn't begin in the

sacred hall of old Philadelphia. It began here. Little churches like this, little houses and little towns and villages, little kitchens and backyards, little conversations, little ideas and dreams, little plans. Church and church people giving voice to a state, giving shape to a state, giving blood for a state of our own.

When I preached this, I had the congregation read some of the Bible's most potent verses about government, citizenship, and leadership. I don't agree with them all, and I bet you'll quibble with some of them when you hear them, but if they're there in the Bible and on topic, then we should face them, and we will sooner or later throughout these episodes.

Here are some of those verses right now:

“God said to Abraham, "Get thee to a far country, and I will make of you a great nation.”

“This is what a king will do. He will take your sons, your daughters, the best of your property, everything you have for his own use, and you will become his slaves.”

“Righteousness exalts a nation. By justice a king gives a country stability. Love and faithfulness keep a king safe. Whoever is kind to the needy honors God.”

“O Lord my God, Thou hast made me king. I don't know how to come or go. Give me therefore a wise and understanding heart that I may discern between good and bad.”

“Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong.”

“Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's, and unto God what is God's.”

“Be ye perfect, even as our God in heaven is perfect.”

Dare I summarize? Well, I'll try. Who's ever in charge? God put them there. Your job is to obey. Their job is to be righteous, good, to do things God's way. God's way is to care for the needy and the vulnerable, to act justly with mercy. And if they don't, they'll crumble one way or another, and so will we. And if they do, they'll prosper, and so will we. Go about it humbly. Remember where we came from, how we got here, and who helped us.

Well, now you see why I need 14 episodes. As I said earlier, I knew from the start that this was the perfect time to look at church and state, one of America's founding principles and hallmarks. For 250 years, we've had a pretty prosperous state and a pretty effective church, each staying out of the other's way, each respecting certain boundaries, certain

individuality, certain freedom. Has it all been 100% A-plus smooth sailing? Of course not. With 340 million voices and generational swings and moods and trends, there are always those who would silence religion or take over the state. Every age, every nation, every religion has its opposite extreme ends, left and right, from revolutionary to apathetic, from *throw the bums out* to *being a bum*. I doubt this podcast or sermon would make a dent with them.

What is far better, far more hopeful, are people who like to think, wrestle, ponder, be challenged and challenged back. Not ideologues led around by the nose by any movement or anyone.

My guess is this nation is important to you. Citizenship is important to you. Leadership is important to you. That's why we could tackle a topic like this. You care about those things.

In one episode, I lay out that much about America began 4,000 or so years ago in ancient Iraq, which used to be the even more ancient Babylon, which once was the even more ancient Chaldees.

And one day, God went to a man named Abraham from Chaldees and made a deal. God said, in effect, I need you to listen to me. I need you to trust me. Pack up everything you have, family, possessions, animals. Pack up your whole life. Leave this place. Leave what you know. And *get thee to a far country*, is how the Bible expresses it. Get thee to a far country, and I will make of you a great nation. And through you, all the peoples of the earth will be blessed. And whoever blesses you, I will bless; whoever curses you, I will curse.

The New York Times had a fun article about America's bicentennial, our 200th anniversary, especially about a two-year series on CBS from 1974 to 1976 called Bicentennial Minutes. These were 60 seconds of quick history, everything from the British bombing of Brooklyn to corn shucking parties in New England, featuring celebrities of the day, from Paul Newman to Lucille Ball, Joe Biden to Gerald Ford, Tennessee Williams to Jessica Tandy. Back in the day of no cable and only a few TV stations, TV's most popular shows would begin or end with a 60-second slice of history.

That got me thinking that maybe for my next project I'll come up with 60-second slices of biblical history Christianity's history, church history, taking us from old Abraham and old Iraq to right now, America 2025.

Of course, we'd start with Abraham heading out to some unknown far country to create a nation that will bless the whole world. Before you know it, we'd have Sodom and Gomorrah, fire and brimstone, family drama, slavery in Egypt, Moses, the Ten

Commandments, the Promised Land, Israel, and Judaism, Judges and kings, success and failure, the prophets warning, the Messiah coming, the Christmas story, Jesus' life and teachings, Jesus' death, then Easter. Then we have Christianity, which spreads throughout the Roman Empire, takes over Europe, splits apart in the 1500s. Christians start hating on each other. Forget the Crusades, what we did to ourselves was worse.

So people got fed up, fed up with church and state. Those purifying Puritans and hard-traveling pilgrims made it to Massachusetts, and others made it to all the other ports up and down the Atlantic seacoast, bringing their baggage and their dreams and their sweat, tackling anything and anyone in their way, for good or ill, generation by generation learning a thing or two, maturing, wisening, freedoms added to freedom, new ideas, new peoples, new religions.

Through it all, hit or miss, we have our ideas of what it means to be a nation being honed, to govern, to be a citizen, to lead. Along the way, we've tried a bit of everything. Capitalism, socialism, know-nothings, Tories, communists, slavery, civil rights, human rights, civil war, Wild West, law and order, justice and mercy. Every generation, sure that it can improve upon the product that is America. In religion, we've been ecstatic, emphatic, evangelistic, save the world, save the planet, save your soul. We've been pietistic, activist, apolitical, and really political. We've been through almost mandatory religion, to the first and second great awakening, to Billy Graham and Jerry Falwell, to God is dead, to apathy and decline, to a surprising resurrection of Christian faith and church.

And all along the way we kept, we keep, trying to figure out what we want from government, from one another as citizens, from leaders we elect.

A recent Wall Street Journal book review summarizes three kinds of authorities that end up in charge of a nation. Traditional authority is hereditary, it says, like a king or a daddy. You get there by being born to it. Legal authority is for those who know the rules, play the game, and massage the institutions. Charismatic authority is personal, when the right personality matches the times and commands the stage, not by birthright, not by gamesmanship, but by charisma, we call it. We just can't take our eyes off them.

So, while some folks at the top figure out how they're going to rule or lead, the rest of us are trying to figure out how to be citizens. Preferably good citizens. Good citizens, good leaders, good governance. That's what makes a great nation. Let's admit it, the Bible does the old switcheroo when it comes to nationhood. In the Old Testament, God really does seem to hope for church and state to be joined at the hip, kissing cousins, two peas in a pod, taking care of business in harmony. In various epics and eras and iterations, God would work through great people like Moses, great warriors like Joshua, great judges like Deborah, great kings like Solomon, great heroes Like Esther, great prophets like Isaiah.

All those great people inspired by God, directed by God, in partnership with God, would lead Israel to greatness.

When it worked, it worked great. A lot of times it didn't work. Humans being human and all. Kings and leaders letting it all go to their heads. By the New Testament, God has changed tactics. At least it seems that way to me. Instead of tithing, God working through monarchy and nobility and heredity, instead of doctored down, God emphasizes us, the people, you and me, the individual heart, the individual citizen. Let us be the best we can be, Jesus always seems to be saying. Then turn us loose to be the best nation we can be. Don't expect me to cheat my company or my customer and then run a government that doesn't and cheat us back. The government is going to reflect us. What we elect or what we allow. They are us, like it or not. Good people make good citizens. Good citizens give rise to good leaders. Good leaders and good citizens result in good governance. There's your great nation.

A lot of this begins with liking America. Notice I said liking. You see, everybody loves America, so they say. Everyone proving their patriotism, falling all over America. Over each other, trying to out-love America. We hug the flag. We wear the flag. We compete to out-patriotize everything. Which coffee is more patriotic? Which sports team? Which celebrity? Movie? State? In an old John Wayne movie, a young cowboy comes to ask permission to marry John Wayne's daughter. In that gruff, iconic John Wayne voice, he says, Do you like her? The young cowboy is perplexed. No sir, I love her! he proclaims boldly. Wayne harrumphs. I know you love her. I want to know if you like her.

Now you live in the same world I do, so you hear and read what I hear and read. People can't say a lot of the things that they're saying and claim to like America. And definitely half of America doesn't like the other half, and that goes for both halves. So that's the whole kit and caboodle, not liking a lot of Americans. How do we thrive like that? Sure, everybody loves America, some idealized version of 1620 America, 1720 America, 1820, maybe 1920. But this ain't them. And then maybe never was.

When we started gearing up for our church's 300th anniversary, I demanded that we work hard to be a strong church in 2025. I didn't want us to look back at the good old days, some golden era when this church was healthy. I wanted us to be at the top of our game now. I wanted us to be proud of where we are now. I wanted us to love Like us now. And we've accomplished that. Frankly, that's what I want for America. A 250th anniversary gift to one another. To like us. To like each other. To like America.

Aim high? Yes. Be humble? Yes. Know our past? Yes.

I read an unusual story the other day in the New York Times about a British journalist who was murdered in the Brazilian Amazon. Two friends of his worked hard to turn his

final notes into a book and reflect on his life. In one chapter, they offer a wonderful quote about their friend's life. They said that he was... rooted in conflict, but searching for solutions. Rooted in conflict, but searching for solutions.

In all honesty, isn't that the history of America? In fact, isn't that the story of life itself? Rooted in conflict. We all have it. Every generation has it. Every decade has it. We are rooted in conflict. But the good among us, the wise among us, the faithful among us, the patriotic among us are searching for solutions, always, and always hopeful. I want that to be my church, my state, my life.

What do you think?