



ACCEPTING OUR
NATION

Presented by

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the king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will.

Proverbs 21 : 1

The year 1976 is the year that America celebrates its 200th anniversary. Fly the flag. Beat the drum. Play the trumpet. If only it were that simple. a feeling it is not going to be entirely easy for Americans to celebrate their bicentennial. They know too much about themselves and about their past. And yet a backward look at a nation's origins can be helpful ... for the people who celebrate and for those who hear some of the things being said at the time of celebration.

It is especially hard for Christians, though, to respond with great enthusiasm to a nation's origins, for Christians, in a sense, belong to a country that circles the world and escapes the confines of the present. Those among them who have been deeply convicted by the message of the Bible have learned to say "my citizenship is in heaven." And they are not talking in a figure of speech when they say that.

The Christian community essentially an international community. This very program illustrates the international quality of the Christian experience. Twenty percent of the Christian Reformed Church which brings you this broadcast is Canadian. And many of the people who are members of the Christian Reformed Church have a special tie to Holland. Moreover The Back to God Hour is also the broadcast of the Reformed Churches of Australia. So you see, there are problems when a person who is in touch with so much of the world, as a Christian always is, thinks about his own country and celebrates its national experience.

The problem a Christian has in celebrating na-

tional festivals and in expressing patriotism in general is heightened by the tendency of every country to view itself as God's great gift to humanity, and in some instances practically to deify the nation itself. A nation's origins are often examined very uncritically its heroes are drawn larger than life, and the country's participation in the common fail in, is of our race are glossed over and forgotten. Thus the years that gave a nation its birth are viewed as extraordinarily significant, as the bicentennial celebration develops and gathers momentum we must expect that the years surrounding 1776 will be viewed as extremely marvelous and 1776 will tend to become nearly

If it is natural for a country's citizens to gild the history of its origins with an unrealistic overlay, this tendency has been expressed with vigor in America. Therefore its Christian citizens should use the occasion of its bicentennial to develop a truly Christian evaluation of their country's origins, in spite of the neon glow of the celebration. If they do, they will benefit from their patriotic experience on the deepest levels.

America in its early years firmly believed that it was God's great gift to man. In his book, *White Locket*, Hermon Melville spoke this way about his country: "We are the pioneers of the world, the advance guard, sent through the wilderness of untried things, to break a new path in the New World that is ours. . . Long enough have we debated whether, indeed, the political Messiah has come. But he has come in. . . And let us remember that with ourselves; almost for the first time in history, national selfishness is unbounded philanthropy, for we cannot do a good to America but we give alms to the world."

Such sentiments illustrate the starry-eyed emotions that can be generated when patriots evaluate their country unmindful of the excellencies of other

nations. But such evaluations were very common in the early years of the American experiment. Even the brutal hatreds that nearly tore the nation in two at the time of the War between the States did not diminish fully this country's conviction that it enjoyed the special favor of God. And this towering, fierce, somewhat unthinking pride was expressed in songs that did not benefit from the slightest national humility or restraint. "Columbia the Gem of the Ocean" was one of those.

The language of Columbia is both exalted and religious. America is viewed as a proud ship cleaving the white water of the world's oceans. Of it, the song says: "The shrine of each patriot's devotion, A world offers homage to thee. Thy mandates make heroes assemble, When liberty's form stands in view; Thy banners make tyranny tremble, When borne by the red, white and blue!"

Today most citizens of the very land that expressed its self-image in this romantic poetry join the rest of the world in recognizing that such language simply does not express the realities of its national life now nor even of its national beginnings. Nowadays we expect that each day's news will bring new revelations of the abridgment of liberty, the weakening of democracy, and the erosion of peace. In all the developed nations of the world, common men look askance at growing government intervention and power. The conduct of those in authority over us now provides sufficient evidence that the tyrannies of George III of England were not exceptionally harsh.

Yes, indeed, when we today examine the origins of a nation like America, we discover that the issues at its beginning were not particularly clear-cut. The history that many of us learned in innocence as children is fast being displaced by historical studies that engender cynicism regarding the founding fathers we were taught to revere. There is evidence

that the Revolutionary War was not so much caused by objective acts of heinous mistreatment as it was caused by a certain revolutionary spirit that owes as much to the inflammatory tracts of Thomas Paine as to anything else.

Indeed, the history of the months immediately preceding the Declaration of Independence shows that there were many within the colonies who had no desire whatsoever for engagement in a battle that would insure their independence. The Continental Congress itself had signed the so-called Olive Branch Petition, which declared that the signers were attached to the person of the king, his family, and his government, and felt themselves "connected with Great Britain by the strongest ties that can unite societies." John Hancock signed this, as did all the others who a few months later signed the Declaration of Independence.

It is not difficult to develop exalted emotions about minutemen at Lexington and Concord, where as Emerson wrote, "the embattled farmers stood, And fired the shot heard 'round the world." The fact is, though, that the opening phase of the Revolutionary War, which boiled along 14 months before the Declaration of Independence itself was signed, was marked by indecisiveness. Colonel George Washington received his first orders in the name of the King of England. Besides, many pious colonists were uncertain about their moral right to participate in a revolt against established authority. They shook their heads and wondered as they read words like these from the Bible: "Live as free men, yet without using your freedom as pretext for evil; but live as servants of God. Honor all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the [King]" (1 Peter 2: 16, 17).

So in the months prior to America's birth, there was really little that indicated that this nation would surely be born as an independent country. Within

the House of Commons proposals for reconciliation were considered, and for a time it seemed as if the colonists would have the opportunity to consider adopting a treaty with the crown that would have allowed them to state their own terms for staying in the empire. Samuel Eliot Morison says of this: "It is highly unlikely that there would have been any revolt in America against such a treaty, for the people did not want war, and they were not yet conscious of separate nationality."

But it happened—the American nation was born! Now as we look back it seems as if it was in spite of circumstances rather than because of them. It was in spite of certain men rather than because of them. Love of country, patriotism, celebration of a nation's beginnings are tempered now by our understanding of how complex the human story actually is, and how mixed and deficient human motivations and actions are. Yet, it happened, and in a real sense the first shot fired at Concord was heard around the world. For it has melded the visions of hundreds of leaders since. Morison reports that at the Bandung Conference of April 1955, Dr. Sukarno referred to the battle of Concord and said of the event: "[It was a] cry of defiance and not of fear, a voice in the darkness, a knock at the door, and a word that shall echo forevermore!" And then the first president of the Indonesian Republic declared: "Yes, it shall echo for evermore!"

Such are the sentiments generated by the anniversaries of battles, victories, and revolutions. But the question that persists is this: What is the proper reaction to all the rhetoric and music nations use to celebrate the high points in their history? Should it all be disregarded as so much political froth? Should we simply assume that, human nature being what it is, we cannot expect to remake in our day an accurate picture of any nation's beginning, so why think too much about it? Is this a time in

which we might be tempted to ridicule all attempts to idealize the great events of the past? Just as we are disappointed frequently with national conduct today, should we simply assume that the actions of the founding fathers were as shoddy in their time?

If I may make a suggestion, it seems to me that we should abandon cynicism and ridicule, and we should begin by recognizing that the existence of every nation represents a fact that must be accepted as an act of God. Sometimes we use the phrase *of God* to describe catastrophes. But those who are aware of the Bible's contents know that the acts of God span all of history and include all events: And if we ask today how it ever happened that a nation so divided and uncertain of itself, a nation so ambivalent in its feelings about the distant authority that governed it could ever mount a revolution that gave the world a new and independent country which would have profound influence on the course of human affairs if we were to ask that, certainly one of the answers that should be given would be this: God was active in the occurrences that resulted in the birth of this nation. And we must accept this nation not as an accident of human history, nor even as the fruit of human wisdom and ingenuity, but as the result of an act of a sovereign God who rules everything, the nations, too.

There is no book that can help us more as we try to understand the nations, and our nation, than the Bible. The Bible reveals that what often appears as an independent judgment on the part of a very important world figure is in fact an event that has occurred under the control of God Almighty. The book of Proverbs in the Old Testament says this in the 21st chapter: "The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it where he will" {v. 1}.

Today, when the limousines cruise down the street, flags flying from the fenders, policemen running ahead, we think, "Now there is power. There is a man who controls the destiny of my country." That's true, and it isn't true. No man holds the ultimate control over the life of his nation. God holds the hearts of the world's leaders and He directs them like a man pours a stream of water from a pitcher and directs it wherever he wants it to go.

This has something to say to the citizens of a nation as they look back and begin to ask questions about their founding fathers. The men who contributed to the events that finally gave birth to a new nation are no better nor any worse than any others who exercise influence. Whether or not a nation and its government should be honored and respected and obeyed does not depend on the heroic stature of the people who began the nation. America exists because God in His good providence so ordered the affairs of men about 200 years ago that America was born. And citizens of other countries, as they look back across the years, can say the same of their nations, too.

The Biblical declaration that God controls the governments of men was never more powerfully displayed than it was when Jesus Christ, the Son of God, stood before a man who tried to impress Jesus with his authority. The man was Pontius Pilate, known to millions because his name was included in the Apostles' Creed. Jesus had been charged by His fellow countrymen with crimes worthy of death. Pilate said: "Do you not know that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you?" Jesus answered him, "You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above ..." (John 19:10, 11).

When we look back across the years we know that God held the hearts, too, of those whose de-

cision then have given us the nations we know today. Thus, the land that celebrates its bicentennial in this year, is a nation in which the citizens may receive the reality of their national existence and all the elements of their national life as something that has come to them from the hand of God. It is not necessary to make the past glow in the brilliant light that can be given it if we ignore all of the evil that existed when America was born and which still exists within it. Nor is it necessary to berate the founding fathers and consider the celebration of 200 years of history foolishness. This is a celebration worth noting and experiencing, just as Canada's 100th anniversary was worth wide spread attention back in 1967.

How should a citizen view his nation? Or, ~~to~~ even more specific, how should a Christian citizen view his nation?

First of all, he should accept it as something which has come into existence because of the controlling providence of God. A Christian must take his nation very seriously indeed. If we have questions when we try to find in the history of our nation's beginnings justification for its violent disengagement from England, we will be disappointed. But today, that fact is not very important. The facts that are important are that this land *did* come into existence and did not come into existence by accident, and this land with all its problems and virtues, with all its assets and liabilities is my country. This is what any Christian can say about his nation. This is my country. I have been placed in it. I owe it my allegiance. I must work for its welfare. I must promote its honor. I must participate willingly in its affairs. And in time of danger and threat, I must defend it against its enemies.

So we accept our land as something God gives us. But, at the same time, we must not be blindly patriotic, nor may we allow ourselves to be intimi-

dated by those who demand national loyalty that involves the compromise of principle and conscience. The Bible announces that nations do not just spring into being all by themselves; too, that every nation must recognize that it is responsible to Almighty God who has revealed His righteousness and His salvation in the lord Jesus Christ.

Those who know the Bible's message concerning the birth of nations must be the first to insist that every national celebration, every formation of national policy, and every expression of national will must be subjected to the bar of divine examination and evaluation. Since God is the one who controls the course of our affairs, those who suggest that a nation can embark on a course of coercion, aggression, or suppression either of those outside its borders or of its own citizens will experience the judgment of God. Those who know that our nation is not divine, but that behind it there is the divine power of the Almighty, must work incessantly to heighten the level of God consciousness within our nation. And they must resist and destroy wherever possible all practices which result in the moral deterioration of the people.

Whenever a nation examines its history and celebrates its origins, it is absolutely essential that nothing be allowed to eclipse the central truth that God is the sovereign lord of every land. No country, by virtue of alleged exalted beginnings and alleged noble record, can set itself up as the great standard of excellence that all other nations should follow. God is the Lord of the nations. He is the ruler of all rulers. "The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will."

Nations are important. The nation of which I am a citizen is important. And behind this God stands. He must be honored. He must be obeyed.

He must be glorified. No nation stands above these obligations. A bicentennial is a time to remember that this is so.

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