

This weekend we celebrate the 4th of July – the anniversary of our nation’s founding. We are in unusual times as a nation when to celebrate our nation and its history does not bring us together. Rather to celebrate our nation’s founding and to stand for its anthem sharply divides us. Even as I sit here on this Friday morning there is a call among some to boycott celebrating our nation’s founding. My family and I will not forego the celebration of our nation’s founding or be ashamed of the red, white and blue colors which make up the nation’s flag. Please don’t hear an “in your face” tone in my words. I want to be able to look back at our nation and its development with the relative objectivity, clarity and wisdom available when looking at events and cultural with the panoramic perspective only provided by history. I want to see, grieve, and learn from her sins and I want to rightly marvel at and celebrate her noble characteristics – make no mistake they both exist in volume. At the same time, and more importantly, I want to bring the voice of God to bear – through His Word – on our (the church’s) ongoing conversation about this nation, which is dear to me. I want to lift the conversation we have up above the narrative set by culture and take it out of the terms the culture uses – I want to lift it all the way up to the throne room of God where I can see the risen and exalted Savior seated at the Father’s right hand – knowing that I am seated there with Him. I want to bring His voice to this discussion – to set it on the unshifting and eternal foundation of the gospel. It is the only way to guard against entering into the narrative of culture on culture’s terms and using the culture’s medium. I do this because of my love for Jesus and my love for you – my desire that you find your bearings in these easily dispiriting times and find your way back to an indomitable hope and unrelenting joy. WE must never allow the culture to define us or seek the culture’s approval by shrinking back from the gospel – being ashamed of Jesus - in the fear of being “cancelled” or censored. Finally we must never allow ourselves to enter into the graceless practice of qualifying or defining a people, a nation or an individual by their worst moments. This is a time for the church to embrace Paul’s admonition of Romans 12:1-2 – more on that Sunday.

Paul Calls the Christian and the Church To Be Distinctive “Gospel People” in This Fallen World – Romans 12:1-2

It All Begins with a Return to Worship – the Worship for Which We Were Created – 12:1

- His calling is based in the mercies of God which we experience in Jesus, in the Gospel – 12:1a

- He calls us to “present our bodies as living sacrifices to God...” This is the fix the gospel provides to humanities fallen condition and all of the awful symptoms of the corruption of the soul it brings to every person and people (nation and culture).

Note: This passage is a wonderful and poignant passage but it finds its incredible depth in understanding it in the context provided by Romans 1:18-32.

- A good and perfect creation – in love. Human beings are originally of a single race whose primary identity is declared to be image bearers of God. We were created with the intellect to know God and the emotion to receive and experience His love and to return love back to Him in

worship. It is our highest experience and deepest joy. We were created male and female in His image (cf. Genesis 1:26, 31). The fall came when man rejected God for the pleasure of the things He created – we will see that the fundamental sin is rebellion that sought to replace God with tyrannical reign of self.

This is explained in terms of the gospel in Romans 1:18-32. It is a record of the corruption of self-deification with its ongoing implications.

- 1:18-20 - We were created to know God in intimate relationship and to see Him in all of His creation. In the great rebellion we intentionally suppressed that knowledge.

- 1:21-22 – We refused to worship Him which includes glorifying Him as God AND giving Him thanks. The impact was/is devastating! The devastation permeates our mind rendering our thinking “futile,” our intellect incapable of knowing the God who reveals Himself everywhere in His creation (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:20-21; John 1:10-11). It permeates our hearts, our loves, our emotions or passions, rendering them foolish and darkened. (feelings/emotions). Paul’s summary statement in 1:22 reads, “Although they (we) claimed to be wise, they became fools...”

- 1:23 – And yet who we are created to be still shows itself – we remain those who long for God, for transcendence (cf. Ecclesiastes 3:11). We remain those who are still built to worship. This is where the devastating “exchange” took place (cf. Genesis 3:1-7). The futile mind and the foolish and darkened emotions – when we look into the creation designed to reveal God to us and to lead us into right hearted worship (“to glorify” God as God and “to give thanks to Him”) – ***we see only ourselves staring back at us and like Narcissus we fall in love with our image and we worship. We take the place God in our hearts and minds, sacrificing all of life to serve the god of self. Here is the birth of every destructive sin in the hearts of men and women – here is where pride gives way to greed, lust, fear, bigotry, hatred, murder, racism... in the hearts of every human being!***

- 1:24-26 – Because we “exchanged” the truth that is God for the lie - God gave us over to serve this little tyrant of self – this little, petty god who gives nothing to us and only demands from us (cf. 1:24-25). We are left staring at our reflections in the pool – loving and worshipping self and hoping against hope to find the pleasure of the experience of God’s love which only He can give!! We give everything to this little demanding tyrant and it is never satisfied (cf. another devastating exchange - 1:26; Ephesians 4:17-19).

- 12:1 – No nation is able to remedy the fallen condition of its citizens or ultimately fix the structural sins inherent to its national life – including any form of racism or bigotry or hatred. We can address its impact on our “systems” but only at the superficial level – even then we risk marginalizing one group in favor of helping another. The fix is found in the gospel call/invitation to return to the right worship of God.

This right worship is restored when God opens the eyes of our “hearts” enabling us to “see” and recognize or “know” the glory of God in the face of Jesus. It is then that we are made alive and we begin to worship (cf. 2 Corinthians 4:6; also John 1:14, 18; Ephesians 2:1-5). That is exactly what Paul was doing when he finished his 11 chapters of gospel teaching with a beautiful and spontaneous doxology – 11:33-36. ***It is as though God, in magnificent and gracious love, reached down and lifted the chin of this Narcissus and said, “Look away from your image and look to me – see my glory – and know that I will satisfy your soul with the richest of fair!!”***

Paul Followed His Call To Worship With A Call To Be The Distinctive People Of God In This Fallen World – 12:2 – The admonition to not “be conformed to this world” but to “be transformed by the renewing of your mind” requires the heart and mind of Jesus - includes both the need to be separate or distinct and also to be imbedded – it is the pattern of “incarnation” after the example of Jesus. We must speak the truth of Jesus in love and live the truth that is Jesus – uncompromisingly and in love. This can only be done by those who are true worshippers!!

- I will begin with a personal testimony which is intended to give you insight into the transformation which has taken place in my passions, allegiances, commitments etc. On August 16, 1978 in a Wednesday night service at the Maranatha Baptist Church on the island of Okinawa God called me to Himself. He opened my eyes to see His glory in the face of Jesus and I was born again by the Spirit. Though I did not fully realize what had taken place, I instantly became a new creation in Christ. Within days I began to experience the transformation of my affections and I became a lover of God above all else (cf. Romans 8:5-11).

- As I studied His Word I began to understand that I was now a citizen of heaven with my hope and my ultimate allegiance transferred to my new King – Jesus – and to His Kingdom (cf. Philippians 3:20-21; also Hebrews 12:28-29). When He made me alive He had transferred me from the kingdom of darkness, the kingdom now under the reign of Satan, to the Kingdom of light, the Kingdom of His beloved Son (cf. Ephesians 2:1-4; Colossians 1:9-13). I began to understand that I was now a stranger and a sojourner in the world, the nation, I had once called home (cf. 1 Peter 1:17; 2:11-12).

- I now knew that God left me here in this place to be an ambassador of the gospel, of my new King – Jesus - and of His kingdom. That didn’t negate my U.S. citizenship or my love for this world or my nation. Rather I sensed more than ever before that God had given me the high calling to love my country more deeply now and with His heart of redemption. It is the high calling given every Christian to carry God’s offer of reconciliation - the “word of reconciliation” - to the world alienated from God by sin (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:17-21; also Matthew 28:18-20).

- So I settled in here in this place – however imperfectly – with the admonition of the prophet Jeremiah resonating in my mind (cf. Jeremiah 29:1-14; also as the Lord said to Solomon at the dedication of the Temple - 2 Chronicles 7:11-16; also 1 Timothy 2:1-7; 2 Timothy 4:1-8). I knew

with all of my heart that the worst thing I could do as a Christian and now as a pastor is to put my love for and allegiance to my earthly nation/home ahead of my love for Jesus and my allegiance to His Kingdom. I could not cherish the flawed offer of liberty made by our founders to the citizens of this nation – a nation so dear to me - ahead of the perfect liberty of soul and the hope it secured purchased at the cross - which is the place of the ultimate victory where my beloved Jesus purchased my life, won my freedom, and secured my hope. It would be catastrophic to this nation and injurious to the cause of Christ.

So - What I have come to know – what I do know with certainty - is that the one and only true God is the God of the Bible. He is the God I came to know, as my Father, through the Son on August 16, 1978 – on a Wednesday night – in that church service on Okinawa. He – my Father – now as then, remains on His throne as the Sovereign One over all of the activities of man – in every detail, in every moment and in every culture throughout history. *I know* that bigotry, racism, insatiable sexual lusts, confusion about identity in all of its manifestations, the exile from God’s presence as a consequence of our innate depravity which leaves us longing for meaning, for purpose which transcends this temporal life – these all and more exist in the hearts of every human being. *I know* that the Bible teaches we were all exiled from the presence of God in Adam and are under “the reign of sin and death” (cf. Romans 5:12-21). We are all born “dead in transgressions and sins” living in a world created by God in perfection and beauty but now cursed because of Adam’s sin. It is a world now temporarily under the rule of Satan (cf. Ephesians 2:1-3; Romans 5:12-21). This explains all that we see going on in our culture – which is not unique to our place and time (cf. Romans 1:18-32). *I know* that no nation – no matter how noble the vision of its founders, no matter how pure its ideals or how fairly its laws are applied – can fix what is wrong in the hearts of its citizens. *I know* that no nation can provide salvation for its citizens and that no nation can be the hope of humanity. Therefore *I know* that “God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). Jesus came to take upon Himself every ounce of hatred, bigotry, racism, sexual sin, rebellion, hopelessness etc. – to destroy Satan, sin, the curse, and death – and to offer forgiveness, reconciliation with God and intimacy with His Father as our Father. Jesus came because God loves everyone of every race. Though I cannot endorse the movement and there is no justification for the rioting taking place in our cities – *I know* that the life of every black man, woman and child *matters to God* – the life of every unborn child *matters to God* – the life of every man or woman whose has same sex attraction *matters to God* – the life of every young person angry about life and lost without purpose *matters to God*. It is because God loves individuals that He sent Jesus to rescue individuals of every race, ethnicity, age group, political persuasion, of every nation. That’s the gospel! Because that is true – *I know* that all of human history is actually the unfolding of His great story of redemption through Jesus. This time and these events in this nation are as much a part of the sovereign, loving and grace filled work of redemption as was first century Rome, as was 16th century Europe (Reformation) or 18th century America. They are all filled with the same glory revealing and sin scarred implications which have characterized every interaction of the kingdoms of man with the Kingdom of God.

The question is Christian will you allow yourself to be conformed to the schemes of this world – be drawn into its narrative on its terms – or will you be transformed by the renewing of your mind so that you can speak the words of reconciliation and be witnesses to the life of God offered in Jesus?

Set your gaze upward in Jesus and speak and model a deep love for this majestic God and declare the glory of His perfect and redemptive love. If you love this nation, this world and its citizens with the heart of God – then let your lives declare this hope to a world in despair (cf. John 3:16; Colossians 3:1-4).