



# THE AMERICAN CIVIL RELIGION

## A Foe, Not a Friend To Christianity

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### *Introduction*

The study of civil religion can be approached from several different perspectives. If analyzed from a *social-cultural* point of view, one is likely to focus on such issues as public morality, social justice and stability. This can lead to the conclusion that a civil religion is necessary to produce and facilitate such civic well-being. On the other hand, if it is studied from the perspective of the *state*, one may seek to discover how a civil religion has been or can be used to serve the state's interests. In what ways does it promote mutual tolerance and national unity among its diverse people groups? How does it help to nurture patriotism, or provide guidance when dealing with other countries? But if we are talking about a *believer's* perspective, the issue must be viewed through the lens of biblical truth. Such a vantage point reveals a clear and distinct difference between a *civil religion* and the doctrines and dictates of a true Christian faith. Such a faith must be grounded, not in any nation's geo-political interests, but in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

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For discerning Christians, there can only be one true “religion.” That we carefully distinguish between that “faith that was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 1:3), therefore, and all other counterfeit religions, civil or otherwise, is of great importance, for we worship a jealous God who will not yield his glory to others (Deut 31:21; Isa. 42:8; 48:11). Sadly, however, professing Christians in America often blur the line between being an “American” and being a “Christian.” Some all but equate the role of the American nation in God’s redemptive purposes with the role of the church. When one listens to the many voices advancing the American Civil Religion (ACR), therefore, it is often difficult to tell whether the point of view is from the interests of society and culture, or the state, or the Christian gospel. As Stanley Hauerwas has observed, one often wonders whether he is seeing a Southern Baptist pastor talking like a Texas politician, or a Texas politician looking like a Southern Baptist pastor.<sup>1</sup>

In this essay, I am speaking as a committed follower of Jesus Christ and student of his Word. It is from this perspective *alone* that I will examine the topic of Civil Religion in America. My purpose is to show how the doctrines and creeds of this pseudo “religion” have been surreptitiously creeping into the Christian Church and how American Christians have carelessly permitted such *civil* “values” to distort *church* theology and practice. My concern is for what it means to be faithful to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. I believe that the purity of the faith among professing American believers is being compromised by the steady inroads of ACR “values” into church thinking. It is a deterioration that not only adversely affects the church in America, but that is being exported to other nations by American missionaries whose view of the gospel has been distorted by the ACR.

To back up these assertions, I will compare and contrast the creeds of the democratic faith of the civil religion in America with the doctrines of the New Testament faith. I will first show the essential differences between the Christian faith and the ACR and argue that the former is now being syncretized by the latter. Then I

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<sup>1</sup> Stanley Hauerwas, *After Christendom? How The Church Is To Behave If Freedom, Justice And A Christian Nation Are Bad Ideas* (Nashville: Abington Press, 1999), 56.

will look at the results of such syncretism when American missionaries travel abroad. Sadly, their objectives and methods are often shaped as much or more by American foreign policies and interests than by biblical truth. As a result, the “gospel” to which they bear witness is a “different gospel—which is really no gospel at all” (Gal. 1:6-7). Paul was a Jew, with a strong sense of his national heritage. He was also a Roman citizen who was willing to take advantage of his “civil rights” when it suited his purpose (Acts 22:25). But he never confused the interests of his national identity with the gospel he preached wherever the Spirit sent him. On the contrary, his uncompromising standard for his missionary efforts was “I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2).

### ***America and the American Civil Religion (ACR)***

The basis for America’s national cohesiveness is more convictional than cultural. This shared conviction is expressed in a creed. It is like being a Jew or a Catholic or a Presbyterian. To be an American, one is expected to espouse the creedal confession of the “religion” of America. Perhaps the very reason why America—in spite of being such a culturally diverse democratic society—has not yet fallen apart can be attributed to this powerful binding force. Such a force is indeed religious in nature and uniquely American. It was first perceptively identified by sociologist Robert Bellah in the late 1960’s. Bellah helpfully labeled it as the “American Civil Religion.”<sup>2</sup>

Bellah observed that “there actually exists alongside of and rather clearly differentiated from the churches an elaborate and well-institutionalized civil religion in America.”<sup>3</sup> His greatest contribution is that he draws our attention to the separateness and uniqueness of the ACR. Though resembling the biblical religions (i.e., Judaism or Christianity), the ACR is possessed of its own set of religious elements. There are sacred persons, events, beliefs, rituals, and symbols that are distinct from those of the true biblical religions. In other words, he argues that the ACR can be seen as

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<sup>2</sup> Robert N. Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” in *American Civil Religion*, ed. Russel E. Richey and Donald G. Jones (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1974), 21-44, originally published in *Daedalus: The Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, 96, no. 1 (Winter 1967): 1-21.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

behaving like a “true” religion. It claims its own access to god and is driven by a societal ethic that performs a distinct function in national and individual life.

As far as the ethos of the ACR is concerned, democracy, freedom, equality and justice are its creed while personal sacrifice, heroism, tolerance, religiosity and morality are its virtues. The Declaration of Independence and Constitution are its scriptures and the national monuments its temple. Memorial Day, Independence Day and Thanksgiving are its holy days and Abraham Lincoln, J.F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King and the soldiers who fought and died in foreign lands for the cause of liberty its revered martyrs. The Liberty Bell and other historic items on display at the Smithsonian, the National Archives and the Library of Congress are its icons. It has the Pledge of Allegiance as its confession and “America the Beautiful,” “God Bless America,” and the “National Anthem” as its sacred hymns. All of these national mores are perpetuated by the ACR’s own catechesis, *the public school system*, and guided by its own Midrash, *the presidential addresses and Supreme Court decisions*.<sup>4</sup> Finally, there is the god of the ACR. The one-size-fits-all, non-dogmatic, non-sectarian, impersonal deity who showers blessings as rewards for faithfulness to the ethos described above, desires social and ethnic unity yet tolerates religious diversity, and is ever on call to serve the national interests.

As a sociologist, Bellah has only concerned himself with the phenomenon of the ACR. He does not examine its roots. Yet, from his descriptions of the ACR and from the works of the many scholars following his lead, we can conclude that the birth of the ACR was indeed coincidental with the founding of America. It was the logical outcome of regarding their place in history through the lens of a self-perceived “Manifest Destiny.”

The earliest American settlers were by and large Christians who viewed their adventure to the New World in the light of Old Testament imagery, often using biblical language to describe their pilgrimage. They saw themselves as the “New Israel” and regarded their crossing of the Atlantic as their own “Exodus” through the “Red Sea.” They believed God had given them a new “Promised Land” and a new “covenant” relationship where they would

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<sup>4</sup> I am here indebted to my colleague, Benjamin S. Cole, for helping me understand in a more concrete way the many things Bellah speaks of in his article. The concepts presented in this paragraph are either taken directly from Cole’s paper “Civil Catechesis and the Democratic Creed in American Public Education” (presented for CHS 5369, Institute of Church-State Studies, Baylor University, Fall 2004) or inspired by him either during in-class discussions or our conversations outside the class.

become a new “city on a hill” that would serve as a model for the rest of the world. They also believed that as they settled in to “possess the land” (Deut. 1:8; 6:18; etc.) they were within their divinely authorized rights to “cast out” (Deut. 6:19; etc.) the heathen already living in their Promised Land. It was these lofty ideals and biblical overtones together with the belief that such blessings could only be assured by maintaining their religious commitments that bred a nationalistic civil religion when America was founded as a nation some 150 years later.

Whether the founding fathers of this nation intentionally created a civil religion by deliberately using biblical language is another topic. What is relevant to this writing is that the ACR, with its non-antiercliceral and non-militantly secular,<sup>5</sup> yet rather biblical-like appearance, has successfully induced many American people, including Christians, to believe that there is no essential conflict between the ACR and Christianity. It is my purpose to show that the striking resemblance between the ACR and the true Christian religion together with the apparent friendliness of the former to the latter makes the ACR a foe, rather than a friend of Christianity. Because of this seemingly friendly guise, the ACR’s attack on the Christian faith is more subtle to discern and its detrimental effects less obvious to recognize.

### ***Christianity and the ACR Compared and Contrasted***

Bellah correctly observed both the similarities and the differences of the ACR and Christianity. He wrote:

Though much is selectively derived from Christianity, this religion [ACR] is clearly not itself Christianity. For one thing, neither Washington nor Adams nor Jefferson mentions Christ in his inaugural address; nor do any of the subsequent presidents, although not one of them fails to mention God.<sup>6</sup>

But the civil religion was not...ever felt to be a substitute for Christianity. There was an implicit but quite clear division of function between the civil religion and Christianity. Under the doctrine of religious liberty, an exceptionally wide sphere of personal piety and voluntary social action was left to the churches.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Bellah, 28. The sense of these terms apparently refers to the ACR’s tolerance of all other religions and non-militant application of its secular objectives.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. (ST Ed. note: Interestingly, George Washington wrote, “The Government of the United States is not, in any sense, founded on the Christian Religion” - *Treaty of Tripoli, 1796*).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 29.

However, what Bellah has observed is merely a formal difference, namely, the absence of Jesus Christ's name and the separate spheres to which the ACR assigns the two religions. But the differences between the ACR and a true Christian religion go much deeper. Some Christians actually do mention the name of Jesus Christ when they talk about America's god,<sup>8</sup> but this merely betrays an assumption that has no basis in fact. The god of the ACR and the God of true Christianity are distinctly different. The two religions have virtually nothing in common. They are based on entirely different doctrines and are incompatible with each other at the very roots. For believers to embrace the ACR as equivalent to or even a friend of true Christianity is to commit spiritual idolatry.

### ***1. The Telos of Human History and a Human Nation***

Both Christianity and the ACR have a teleological worldview [i.e., a concern with its design and purpose]. There is a God-given purpose for human life and human history. For Christians, the focus is on the eternal destiny of sinners. The Gospel message is that Christ came to bring redemption to the individual sinners at the present age,<sup>9</sup> and the redemption of the creation/society in the age to come.<sup>10</sup> To be a Christian is to believe in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, and to expand God's Kingdom by bringing this Gospel message to other lost souls. Scripture tells us that as we build the Kingdom of God we will surely encounter oppositions and hardships. In other words, the church is to live in the very midst of a world that is under the kingdom of darkness. When Christ said, "You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden"

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<sup>8</sup> For example, the Christian Right and those in Reformed circles who hold the "Christian America" view. A typical example can be found in the following Internet article where the author, a devout Christian, it seems, demonstrates absolutely no awareness of distinctions between the cause of America and the cause of Christianity. Tracy Lin O'Very, "Accept Everything America is About!" From [www.useless-knowledge.com/1234/new/articles312.html](http://www.useless-knowledge.com/1234/new/articles312.html), accessed on Nov. 28, 2004.

<sup>9</sup> See for example, 1 John 5:13, "I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that *you have eternal life*." *NIV*, emphasis added.

<sup>10</sup> For example, see Romans 8:19 ff, "The creation waits in eager expectation.... For the creation was subjected to frustration ...by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom.... We know that the whole creation has been groaning.... Not only so, but we ourselves...groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for...the redemption of our bodies." *NIV*.

(Mat. 5:12 NIV), he was addressing his *disciples* specifically, and his emphasis was on the *duty* of the believers to live a life of light, rather than on the *result* of the world being turned into light.

For the ACR, however, the telos is about the *nation* of America. “American Civil Religion,” explains Leroy Rouner, Director of the Institute for Philosophy and Religion at Boston University, “is, rather, the beliefs we share with our fellow citizens about our national purpose and the destiny of our national enterprise. Vague and visceral it may be, but there is an American creed, and to be an American is to believe that creed.”<sup>11</sup> The creed says God has chosen America as his agent to bring the Gospel of democracy, justice and equality to other nations in the world. To be an American is to believe this God-assigned purpose for America; to subscribe to this creed is to participate in this “Great Commission” of America.

Perhaps this self-assumed messianic role for America may be traced back to the Pilgrims who often described their emigration to America in Old Testament “exodus” terms. In 1630, this analogy was further enhanced by John Winthrop in his famous sermon, “A City on a Hill” where he urged the newly formed Massachusetts Bay Colony to forge a new, special agreement with God, like the one between God and the people of Israel. In recent years, that same theme was baptized into the ACR by the Reaganian notion of a “Shinning City upon a Hill,” a nation “willing to carry out its responsibility as the custodian of individual freedom.”<sup>12</sup> The indispensable role of America as Savior of a pining world has never been more boldly asserted by an American president: “A troubled and afflicted mankind looks to us, pleading for us to keep our rendezvous with destiny; that we will uphold the principles of self-reliance, self-discipline, morality, and—above all—responsible liberty for every individual; that we will become that shining city on a hill.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Patricia Kasten, “U.S. Civil Religion: Nation’s Common Religion Has Nothing To Do With Eternity, But With Symbols And Daily Life.” *The Compass: Official Newspaper of the Catholic Diocese of Green Bay, Wisconsin*, Editorial March 1, 2002 Issue, [www.thecompassnews.org/2002-03-01/02cn0301c4](http://www.thecompassnews.org/2002-03-01/02cn0301c4), accessed on September 11, 2004.

<sup>12</sup> Taken from Ronald Reagan’s speech, “America’s Purpose in the World,” March 17, 1978, 5th Annual CPAC Conference, found at [http://reagan2020.com/speeches/Americas\\_World\\_Purpose.asp](http://reagan2020.com/speeches/Americas_World_Purpose.asp), accessed on Dec. 9, 2004.

<sup>13</sup> Ronald Reagan’s speech for “Announcement for the Presidency”, given November 13, 1979, found at [www.thereaganlegacy.com/version2/speechesPrinter.asp?SID=2](http://www.thereaganlegacy.com/version2/speechesPrinter.asp?SID=2), accessed on Dec. 9, 2004.

This ought to concern us as Christians, at least from a theological standpoint. First of all, there is a distortion of the Kingdom agenda. Salvation, at this present age, is about the destiny of individual sinners and not the destiny of the nations of the world, let alone any particular nation. Scripture tells us that a perfect society is only to be found in the *eschaton*, not here and now.

The ACR does not concern itself with the regeneration of fallen men, but only seeks to build an ideal world. As we noted above, Christ's command to his followers to be a light to the world assumes the presence of perpetual darkness in that world. The ACR's mandate is to eradicate that darkness (however it is understood), while the Christian faith only calls us to witness to it and to endure it. No doubt, a true and powerful faith like that of Christianity should have an impact on a nation. It is not inherently wrong for Christians to engage themselves in the various cultural and political issues of a nation. But the transformation of a culture through political means is temporal and relative at best. When American Christians embrace the ACR, however, the inevitable result is to seek to build a kingdom on earth—beginning, of course, with America.<sup>14</sup>

When people accept the notion that their nation has been chosen by God for divine purposes, nationalism inevitably rises to idolatry. A measure of patriotism is certainly common to all nations. But when the people of a nation assume that their destiny is divinely ordered and make active participation a creed, it is the Christian's duty to challenge this claim—not to endorse it.

The question American Christians need to ask is this: how does one know that this nation merits God's special favor? Has there

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<sup>14</sup> Do we not see this happening already? There are Christian groups who advocate a "Kingdom Now" theology, for example, Earl Paulk and his Pentecostal movement. Paulk was influenced by another similar movement among the Christian evangelicals—dominion theology, which also aims at building God's kingdom on earth. See brief accounts of these recent Christian movements by Bruce Barron and Anson Shupe in the introductory paragraphs of their article, "Reasons for the Growing Popularity of Christian Reconstructionism: The Determination to Attain Dominion," in *Religion and Politics Comparative Perspective*, ed. Bronislaw Misztal and Anson Shupe (Westport, Conn: Praeger Publishers, 1992), 83-96. The thoughts that Christians are to realize God's Kingdom here and now are widely spread among American Christians. Essays like this are commonly seen on the Internet, "America as God's Kingdom on Earth" from *Turnabout*, found at <http://jkalb.org/node/1161>, accessed on December 9, 2004. Also critiques of the Kingdom on earth movement by Bruce Barron's book *Heaven on Earth? The Social and Political Agendas of Dominion Theology*. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House), 1992.

ever been a divine revelation given to this nation directly? Scripture tells us that only *one ethnic nation*, Israel, has ever been chosen by God for special favor. It was through Israel that God's promise to Abraham to bring redemptive blessings to all the nations of the earth was to be accomplished (Gen. 18:18). But the Bible also teaches that Israel was only a type. The antitype is Jesus Christ, from whom was born the church that bears his name. God's covenant is now with the church alone where there is "neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female," for all believers are now "one in Christ" (Gal. 3:28). In the New Testament age, no earthly nation—Israel, America or any other—has a covenantal claim to God's special favor.

While some would admit that America may not be a chosen nation in the same sense that Israel was chosen, they point to the fact that America is presently the most wealthy, powerful and influential nation in the world. This prosperity, they conclude, is sure evidence that God's blessing rests on America. But when, except for brief periods in Israel's history under the Old Covenant, has material prosperity and military might ever been evidence of God's favor? On the contrary, biblical history clearly shows that world dominance and power have more often been precursors to a nation's destruction<sup>15</sup> just as the material prosperity of the wicked forebodes impending ruin.<sup>16</sup>

Others would argue that America enjoys God's favor because it was founded on principles of democracy, justice and equality. In other words, America has *earned* God's blessing. If the American people want to continue to be blessed, they must continue to act in ways pleasing to God. This is exactly the argument advanced by many of today's American evangelical leaders. To make America a "moral" society by whatever means possible has become the primary agenda of many of these evangelical defenders of the ACR.

There is also the assumption that America is blessed because of the democratic system it upholds. It is assumed that this system is a

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. the ultimate end of OT Egypt, Assyria, Babylonia, Persia, Greece, and the Roman Empire. All of these nations were wealthy and powerful until God destroyed them.

<sup>16</sup> For example, in Psalm 73: 3-19, the Psalmist says, "I saw the prosperity of the wicked. They have no struggles; their bodies are healthy and strong. They are free from the burdens common to man; they are not plagued by human ills.... When I tried to understand all this, it was oppressive to me till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny. Surely you place them on slippery ground; you cast them down to ruin. How suddenly are they destroyed, completely swept away by terrors!" *NIV*.

biblical model and therefore pleasing to God. But one could justifiably argue that the American system has actually bred more immorality and corruption than many other less democratic regimes. In point of fact, in this New Testament age, the Kingdom of God (the church) is meant to propagate throughout the world regardless of existing political regimes. The Bible calls all kings and civil magistrates to act justly and righteously, but it never specifies a governmental system, let alone a specific paradigm—namely the American model—as the most biblical.

Finally, even if we grant that America is being used by God to accomplish his world-wide redemptive purposes, we have no biblical warrant to find a causal link between such providential sovereignty and any supposed merit in the American democratic system and its ACR values. Since this point goes to the very core of the Protestant faith—*that God's favor cannot be merited by men's good work*—I will devote the next section to it under the broader topic of public morality and civic virtues.

## **2. On Morality and Virtues**

Like many world religions, the ACR has a strong emphasis on morality and virtue as necessary prerequisites to God's blessing. What the Bible actually teaches, however, is that godly morals and virtues are the *fruits* of a regenerated heart and mind and not a meritorious *cause* for God's favor. However "moral" and "virtuous" unregenerate intents and actions may *appear*, all such self-righteous works are no more than "filthy rags" (Isa. 64:6) in God's sight. The Bible clearly teaches, in fact, that without the regenerating power of the New Birth, condemned sinners are totally *incapable* of doing anything "righteous" or "good."<sup>17</sup>

To allege that God has blessed America on the basis of *merit* is the doctrine of a *performance-based* religion. But the Christian faith is *grace-based*. It teaches that God's favor can never be earned by fallen man's deeds. This does not mean that the unregenerate cannot display moral virtues and produce civic deeds beneficial to society. But those virtues and deeds can never lift the condemnation of unbelief nor merit God's approbation and reward. Grace, whether unto salvation or in the bestowing of undeserved temporal mercies, is always unmerited by fallen men.<sup>18</sup> Therefore,

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<sup>17</sup> For Scripture makes it clear that "There is no one righteous, *not even one*; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; *there is no one who does good, not even one.*" Romans 3:10, *NIV*, italics mine.

<sup>18</sup> For Scripture tells us that God "causes his sun to rise on the evil *and* the good, and sends rain on the righteous *and* the unrighteous." Matthew 5:45, *NIV*.

*if* a sovereign God does choose to use America to accomplish his purposes, the reason is no different than it was with Egypt in the days of Moses, or with Babylon in the days of Nebuchadnezzar, or with the Roman Empire in the days of Nero. The proposition that if Americans maintain a democratic political system, obey the Ten Commandments, and espouse “traditional moral values,” God is *obligated* to bless this nation is not only presumptuous, but the very antithesis of a true gospel faith.

Some may concede that *any* external morality offered by unregenerate sinners is still no more than “filthy rags” in God’s eyes, yet encourage Christians to promote it because it is nevertheless good for society. The problem here is not that promoting civic good directly contradicts gospel truth, but that the Christian faith is being *used*, and often *compromised* to serve such non-redemptive cultural ends. In other words, the Christian faith is made the servant of the ACR, if not straight-jacketed by it. I fear that if believers do not stand apart and stress the qualitative differences between true Christianity and the ACR, it will not take long for Christianity to be reduced to a religion of mere morality and tolerance. For many, sadly, it already has.

What needs to be stressed here is that the ACR wants nothing to do with gospel truth that Christianity should defend as essential, focusing only on what Christianity should regard as peripheral at best. For believers to adjust their methodology to accommodate the Christ-less gospel of the ACR is to deny the very heart of the Christian faith. We need to understand that what the ACR wants is a people that are moral and religious, but not necessarily Christian.<sup>19</sup> Faithful followers of Jesus Christ, however, must insist that one *cannot* be truly moral *without* becoming a Christian! Whatever measure of morality, freedom, justice or equality may be legislated and enforced upon an unbelieving society, such external appearance, *from a biblical perspective*, is no more than a “whitewash” that hides “dead men’s bones” (Mat. 23:27).

I am not arguing that we as believers should be totally apathetic about societal well-being, but that we put such efforts into a kingdom perspective. Any temporary and external good that we as

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<sup>19</sup> Jon Zens and Cliff Bjork in their co-authored article “A Better Society Without The Gospel: Unbiblical Cultural Expectations Of Many Christian Leaders,” *Searching Together* 27, 1-3 (Spring-Fall 1999): 1-10, powerfully argued that American evangelical Christians are more eager to promote a “Judeo-Christian morality” than “righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ,” p. 3.

believers promote must be *incidental* and *derivative* to the primary cause of the Gospel. The biblical principle is “seek *first* his kingdom and his righteousness and *all these things* [be they personal or social blessings] will be added unto you” (Mat. 6:33, emphasis mine). The problem with many American evangelical leaders is that they have reversed priorities, and subjugated the gospel mandate to political agendas. I am reminded of a sign that appeared in front of Jerry Falwell’s Thomas Road Baptist Church a number of years ago, “Get’em Saved—Get’em Registered!”<sup>20</sup>

In the Old Testament, blessing or cursing came upon the nation of Israel in direct response to her compliance with or failure to meet the terms of a God-initiated Covenant with that nation of Israel. There are many today who teach that this is an abiding principle that applies to all nations—especially, of course, The United States. But the blessings or curses that came upon Israel are *not* a universal model, and must be understood in their Old Testament covenantal setting. God chose the people of Israel from among all other nations and made a unique covenant with them. America has *never* been under such a God-initiated covenant. Therefore, America *does not have a claim* to the covenantal blessings and curses that bound Israel.

Suppose, for a moment, that ethical behavior *was* a standard for divine blessing upon a nation. We must then ask, “What counts as a moral virtue?” The virtues advocated by the ACR are not necessarily (if ever) the same as those advanced by Christians. The ACR preaches individual and national *tolerance* of varied ethnic and cultural backgrounds, and a non-dogmatic, cooperative *syncretism* between all religious traditions. For true followers of Jesus Christ, however, virtue is defined by purity of doctrine and life, by faithfulness to the *exclusive* claims of the gospel, and by a willingness to endure suffering and death, if needs be, for the sake of Christ’s Kingdom. Because of these divergent objectives, the ACR and true Christianity often find themselves in great tension with one another.

Consider tolerance, for example. Both the ACR and the Christian religion advocate tolerance, but define such tolerance quite differently. This is where the ACR concept of “tolerance” differs greatly from that of the true Christian religion. For the ACR to accomplish its goal of unity within the State, all religions must be not only tolerated, but regarded as equally valid. Such a view of

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<sup>20</sup> Reported by Jon Zens and Cliff Bjork.

tolerance, of course, ultimately leads to pluralism and relativism—exactly what we find in today’s American culture. For the ACR, tolerance is closely tied to the humanistic doctrine of relativism. There is a passionate defense of the need for national “moral values” to please God and merit his blessing, but a total unwillingness to grant that his Son has the *exclusive* and *absolute* authority to define “moral values.” There is a call to prayer and worship, but it is to the mush god of Alcoholics Anonymous: “god as you understand him/her/it.” And there is the constant appeal to America’s supposed “Judeo-Christian heritage,” accompanied by an open hostility to anyone who dares suggest that there is any difference between the “Judeo” and the “Christian” part of that heritage. ACR tolerance demands that no one claim *exclusive* access to God, be they Christian, Jewish, Islamic, or whatever. The shrine the ACR has constructed for God, therefore, is more like the Pantheon of Rome than the “dwelling” of believing minds and hearts “in which God lives by his Spirit” (Eph.2:22). In the end, in spite of the religious rhetoric, the ACR has engendered a nation like the one described in the book of Judges where “every man did that which was right in his own eyes” (17:6). It is a culture where there are no ethical or theological absolutes.

The concept of tolerance embedded in the Gospel, however, is radically different. It is not a matter of accepting other *religions* as equally valid. To do so would be to commit spiritual idolatry, “For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Tim. 2:5). Gospel “tolerance” has to do with how we treat the sinner *himself*, not how we view his beliefs, or lack of beliefs. Unlike the coercive methods approved by some religious zealots (e.g. Islamic Fundamentalists or Christian Theonomists), there is no similar *Gospel* mandate to *force* our beliefs and practices on anyone—regardless of how flagrantly their lives betray their rebellion against God. Just as God himself is “longsuffering” toward sinners, we, too, must be patient and tolerant toward all whom we encounter, without respect to race, culture, religious tradition or lack thereof. After all, it was “while we were yet sinners...that Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8). The admittedly difficult task, however, is to accept the sinner for who he *is*, yet lovingly confront what he *believes*, or does not believe. That’s the paradox. While we must do everything possible not to offend the sinner *personally*, the *message* we are called to proclaim is, by nature of its exclusive demands, inherently offensive. It is

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what Paul referred to as “The offence of the cross” (Gal. 5:11). Our gospel responsibility, therefore, is not to force moral reform (or even our faith) upon unwilling unbelievers, but simply to bear faithful witness by life and word to Jesus Christ as the only “way” to the Father. Moses and Judaism cannot provide such access. Mohammed and Islam cannot provide it. *Nor can the ACR.*

### ***3. On the doctrine of freedom or liberty***

Freedom, or liberty, is an essential theme to both Christianity and the ACR. Similarly, both acknowledge the presence of an oppressive or enslaving power. For the Christian faith, the oppression is *spiritual* in nature. Men are born in sin, enslaved to sin, and deluded by false beliefs. Only through a saving union with Jesus Christ can they be set free *from* their bondage to sin and falsehood, and *to* true religion and true worship. For the ACR, however, the oppressive power is *political* in nature. Men are *born* with an inalienable right to freedom and liberty that includes the right to be free *from* political tyrannies, and to be free *to* believe (or not believe) whatever their consciences dictate. Freedom for the ACR is an end in itself, while freedom for the followers of Jesus Christ has a higher end—the goal of knowing and worshipping the only true God. The Christian faith is *God-centered*, therefore, while the ACR is totally *man-centered*.

The fact is that Scripture recognizes no such freedom in man as the ACR (and its pawns from the Religious Right) advocates. Individual man *is not* the final and autonomous authority for choosing what and whom to believe. To claim the inherent right to believe whatever one sees fit in his or her own eyes is not the definition of *freedom*, but of rebellion and sin. What the Bible actually teaches is that to be truly “free” is to be free from sinful self and a willing *slave* of Jesus Christ.<sup>21</sup>

One might argue that supporting the ACR in fighting for and preserving religious liberty does not necessarily contradict the Christian faith—as long as we do not endorse all of the content of the ACR version of liberty. We can always supplement the ACR version of liberty with our own definition. But religious liberty itself, they argue, needs to be protected. In order for us to be able to worship the true God freely in spirit, we need an external

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<sup>21</sup> Romans 6:18, “You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness.”  
2 Peter 2:19, “A man is a slave to whatever has mastered him.” *NIV.*

environment that allows us to exercise such internal freedom. The battle for *religious liberty*, therefore, is a necessary prerequisite to enjoying *spiritual freedom*.

Such a priority may be essential to the ACR agenda, but it does not serve the objectives of true Christianity. Sadly, however, many professing Christians in America have been deceived into equating the ACR notion of *civil liberty* with the true Christian concept of *spiritual freedom*.<sup>\*</sup> It has weakened their spiritual strength and resolve to willingly suffer for the Name of Jesus Christ at the hands of their unbelieving countrymen (cf. Mat. 10:22; John 15:18-20; Acts 5:41; 1 John 3:13. et al). It has also distorted the focus of their missionary efforts abroad, especially in countries with oppressive regimes. The priority has more to do with inciting the citizenry to fight for the American notion of *civil liberty* than to bring the message of the true *spiritual freedom* that the Gospel promises to all who believe. The fact is that nowhere in the New Testament is there even a hint that believers are expected to make fighting for religious liberty a part of exercising their faith. If anything, the Scripture teaches quite the opposite.

The state, to lesser or greater degrees, has been and *always* will be hostile to the true Christian faith. Efforts to restrict or forbid believers to freely practice and propagate their faith have been with us since the church was born. That is the very nature of God's judgment when he imposed "enmity" between the "seed of the serpent and the "seed" of the woman. Nevertheless, Scripture never suggests that the *state* must be conquered or converted in order for the *church* to survive. The *co-existence* of the church with States that will be hostile is assumed. Not only does Scripture *not* promise or encourage the followers of Jesus Christ to fight for religious

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<sup>\*</sup> ST ed. Note: To add supposed biblical justification to their efforts to fight for civil liberty, Christians who espouse the ACR agenda often wrench these phrases out of their OT context:

...proclaim liberty throughout all the land...(Lev. 25:10).

Righteousness exalteth a nation...(Prov. 14:34).

If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land (2 Chron. 7:14).

Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord...(Psa. 33:12).

These passages pertained *exclusively* to the nation of Israel under the OT Mosaic economy. They did not apply to any of the surrounding nations then, and they certainly do not apply to *any* geopolitical nation, *including Israel*, during the present Gospel age. Today, the only "righteous" nation that truly enjoys "liberty" and "whose God is the Lord" is that "chosen generation...royal priesthood...*holy nation*" that Peter identifies in his first letter (2:9).

liberty, it warns them to *expect* trouble. “In this world *you will have trouble*. But take heart! *I have overcome the world*” (John 16:33, NIV, emphasis added). “Peace I leave with you; *my peace* I give you. I do not give to you *as the world gives*. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid” (John 14:27, NIV, emphasis added). “If the world hates you, keep in mind that *it hated me first*” (John 15:18, NIV, emphasis added).

Furthermore, the New Testament clearly teaches that all authorities, be they friendly or hostile to God’s people, are under God’s sovereign providential control. Pontius Pilate, speaking for a hostile state/political authority, arrogantly challenged Jesus, “Don’t you realize I have power to either free you or to crucify you?” But Jesus responded, “You would have no power over me *if it were not given to you from above*” (John 19:11-12, NIV, emphasis added). Jesus’ reply made it quite clear that spiritual freedom is not something for the state to either grant or take away.

Religious liberty is neither a prerequisite nor an essential element of a life of true gospel faith. It is rather *a grace* that is only *occasionally* granted by God to his people. Like all other graces, it is given or withheld as best suits his redemptive purposes. And the fact is that for most of the history of the church, although God indeed has the power to do so, he has *not* prevented the state from depriving his people of their civil freedom to freely and openly exercise and propagate their faith. Paradoxically, it is at times of such suffering and persecution by hostile regimes that believers have been the strongest in their faith and the most effective in advancing the gospel (cf. Acts 6:8-8:4). God knows what he is doing.

God’s people, therefore, often find themselves suffering under oppressive political regimes. Nevertheless, Scripture *never* commands nor even encourages them to resist oppression and fight for liberty and freedom. On the contrary, believers are clearly instructed to “Submit yourselves *for the Lord’s sake* to every authority [hostile or friendly] instituted among men: whether to the king, as the supreme authority, or to governors” (1 Pet. 2:9, NIV, emphasis added). Many have died and will die for the sake of the gospel. Jesus said, “Do not be afraid of those *who kill the body* but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (Mat. 10:28, NIV, emphasis added).

Unlike some of the world's religio-political systems, the mission of the ACR is not to suppress or exterminate Christianity, but rather to contaminate, distort, marginalize, syncretize, and supercede it. Sadly, many undiscerning believers in Jesus Christ have been deceived into equating such civil religion with true Christianity. Not only have they failed to safeguard the purity of a true *biblical* faith, but some have gone so far as to become active proponents, militant defenders and zealous missionaries of a "religion" that actually *regards the Gospel of Christ as scandalous*.

Let's examine this rather serious charge more closely. First, Christianity becomes subservient to the ACR, and the god of the ACR—however defined and perceived—ranks above the God of Christianity. Whether in the media, or from the pulpit, it was clear during the last presidential election that many professing American Christians were more zealous to defend the honor of the ACR than to boldly identify with the true gospel.

Second, the essential, or defining elements of Christianity are made either peripheral or irrelevant, while implications that are derivative or secondary at best are defended and promoted as fundamental and essential. Judged by their rhetoric and actions, many evangelical Christians seem more concerned with preserving the civic benefits of American society than with the eternal fate of their unbelieving neighbors! This sad distortion is evidenced by the fact that there is more concern for assimilating Muslim populations into this country by "Americanizing" them than by *evangelizing* them. And a president who is a militant proponent of the ACR and believes that the faithful of all religions could go to heaven<sup>22</sup> is regarded by many evangelicals as a divinely appointed and faithful servant of God to lead this country.

Third, the preservation and advancement of Christianity is made dependent on the ACR. For that reason the interests or agenda of the ACR takes precedence over that of the Christian Church. Evangelicals are more concerned about defending democracy, equality, freedom and justice than with advocating *and exemplifying* such true biblical virtues as self-denial, love for one's enemy, surrendering any and all "rights" for the sake of the gospel, and rejoicing in suffering for their identification with Jesus Christ.

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<sup>22</sup> The very antithesis of Christ's claim, "I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man comes to the Father, *but by me*." John 14:6, *NIV*, emphasis added.

I am not suggesting that believers deliberately *ask* for suffering and oppression. There is nothing wrong with collaboration with unbelievers in promoting and preserving a better society and culture. The problem that often arises, however, in pursuing such cultural mandates<sup>23</sup> is when they are regarded as equivalent to or even *superseding* true kingdom agendas. Bringing *true* moral transformation to an unbelieving society is not possible except through the gospel, and the gospel has no credibility unless it is first at work within the Christian community.

Church history bears undeniable witness to the fact that the world's societies have often been changed by the forbearance of persecuted believers to terrible injustices and hardships. Paul tells us, "though we live in the world, *we do not wage war as the world does*. The weapons we fight with *are not the weapons of the world*. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds" (2 Cor. 10:3-5, *NIV*, emphasis added). Such a clear Christian principle seems to have been completely lost in much of today's alleged Christian Church in this country. In its place we find such ACR virtues as protecting and defending individual rights and social justice. And the methodology is no longer a simple witness to the gospel, but rather political activism and campaigns, lobbying, civil litigations, and belligerent "common cause" ventures for fighting the perceived culture wars.

Ironically, the American Christians' mentality that demands a trouble-free, opposition-free and comfortable external environment in which to exercise their faith and live their lives has actually made them even more vulnerable to persecution and hardship. When things do not go their way, they are often quick to question why God permits such perceived injustice and suffering. Pastors, therefore, are expected to be more therapist than teacher—more counselor than preacher. Seldom, however, do we hear believers from countries where persecution is a part of daily life question the goodness and love of God. They have been conditioned by their suffering to adopt a theology of the Cross.

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<sup>23</sup> Borrowing here a theological term from the Dutch theologian and statesman of the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century, Abraham Kuyper. "Cultural mandate" means Christian's involvement in changing the culture is a biblical mandate, parallel to the Gospel mandate.

### ***Go Ye and Democratize All Nations: The ACR in the Mission Field***

Not only has the ACR subtly affected the theology and methodology of professing Christians in America, it is also shaping how missions are perceived and conducted in foreign countries by American Christian missionaries. The influence of the ACR on missions is more at the subconscious than conscious level of both the missionaries and those who send them. I'm certain they truly believe they are bringing the Gospel of Jesus Christ to places where his name is largely unknown. Yet, because they apparently lack the biblical discernment to recognize the deceptive influences of the ACR, they have allowed themselves to become its witnesses, by becoming missionaries for the ACR – advocates of a “different gospel” – the pseudo-gospel of American democracy.

The Great Commission is a mandate to evangelize *all nations*. But American missionary projects seem to focus on *non-democratic* nations—perhaps because such efforts tend to garner more financial support from sponsoring congregations. Also, many American Christians seem more concerned with countries they perceive as threats to the “American way of life” (i.e., the ACR).

China, for example, first began to embrace a market economy in the early 80's. Soon thereafter, American politicians and journalists began to paint China as a dangerous awakening lion. Such reports exposed a hidden fear of the world's largest nation and called for a rethinking of American foreign policy.<sup>24</sup> Is it merely coincidental that such a perceived threat to the American culture and economy (the polemics of the ACR) should concurrently stir a corresponding reaction by the American Church to make China a main focus for missionary activity? I doubt it. In the same way, as the Islamic nations are increasingly perceived as a threat to the American way of life, much of the American missionary community is likely to focus new efforts on trying to penetrate such Islamic strongholds.

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<sup>24</sup> For examples, see articles by Robert B. Zoellick, “China: What Engagement Should Mean?” *The National Interest*, Dec. 1, 1966, [www.keepmedia.com/pubs/NationalInterest/1996/12/01/528638](http://www.keepmedia.com/pubs/NationalInterest/1996/12/01/528638); Rejan Menon and S. Enders Wimbush, “Asia in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Power Politics Alive and Well,” *The National Interest*, March 1, 2000, [www.keepmedia.com/pubs/NationalInterest/2000/03/01/528834](http://www.keepmedia.com/pubs/NationalInterest/2000/03/01/528834); John Henderson and Benjamin Reilly, “Dragon in Paradise: China's Rising Star in Oceania,” *The National Interest*, June 1, 2003, [www.Keepmedia.com/pubs/NationalInterest/2003/06/01/529036](http://www.Keepmedia.com/pubs/NationalInterest/2003/06/01/529036); Niall Ferguson, “A World Without Power?” *Foreign Policy*, July 1, 2004, [www.keepmedia.com/pubs/ForeignPolicy/2004/07/01/495370](http://www.keepmedia.com/pubs/ForeignPolicy/2004/07/01/495370).

The problem here is not whether we should regard these countries as in need of the Gospel more than any other countries in the world, but rather, what has motivated the American Christian churches to decide where to send their missionaries, what strategies are used and what messages are being brought to the mission field.

Perhaps a concrete example may help illustrate the problem. At the most recent annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, a workshop on Islam was offered by a speaker who described himself as a “militant evangelist” to the Muslims in New York. He said that his denomination also focused its mission work on the Islamic countries in the Middle East. One might expect a presentation by such an experienced evangelist to Muslims to focus on strategies for reaching Muslims for Christ. To our surprise—and dismay—he offered nothing of the kind, but instead gave us lurid accounts of horrible things Muslims had done to their missionaries. He outlined what the Koran teaches about Jihad and railed on how much Muslims hate Christians and Americans, punctuated by alleged examples of atrocities committed in recent years against “us” (i.e., Americans). I heard a similar message by another alleged evangelistic “expert” to Muslims from my own denomination.

Such unloving and resentful attitudes are quite revealing. A *true* missionary heart that is compelled to share the Gospel with lost sinners in other lands should *expect* to encounter hostility, and respond in love. When that expectation and response is missing from the missionary himself or from the organization that sponsors him, we must wonder if the motivation is truly the Great Commission, or something else. Sadly, that “something else,” seems to fit the motives and agenda of the ACR quite well!

We must ask, therefore, what is the real motivation behind “foreign mission” efforts like the examples above? If not driven by a genuine love for lost souls, what else inspires such investments in time and money? Sadly, the eternal destiny of those supposedly being “evangelized” is a secondary concern at best. The primary objective is to preserve and protect America’s turf and to secure her “divinely ordained” rights to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” It is less a matter of *evangelizing* the world, therefore, than of democratizing or *Americanizing* people from other hostile nations as a way to preempt perceived threats to the “American way of life.” That so many professing believers should espouse this “different gospel” (2 Cor. 11:4; Gal. 1:6) is convincing evidence of the extent to which ACR thinking has infected the minds (and tapped the purses) of the American evangelical community.

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Not long after America's preemptory invasion of Iraq—ostensibly to declare war on terrorism, oust the tyrannical Hussein regime, and establish a “free” democratic society—some Christian organizations wasted no time seizing the opportunity to show the *Jesus* film to the Iraqis. The importance of this event does not lie in the act of showing the film, but in how that showing was conducted and publicized. It was given considerable attention by the media—far beyond any attention paid to similar “evangelistic” events *in America*. The “story” that attracted the media was that because of American military efforts, there is now “freedom” to preach the gospel in Iraq. The story is not in the propagation of the gospel, but in the “freedom” to openly express formerly taboo views.

The difference is significant. In prior times, missionaries to foreign lands frequently invested their whole lives—often in the most hostile circumstances—to *earn* a listening ear. Now, all it takes is an occupying military force to provide such evangelistic opportunity. This has resulted in a subtle change in missionary methodology and message. The primary focus is no longer on personal regeneration, but on gaining *religious liberty*. The film, originally intended to tell the story of Jesus, is used rather as a symbol of the success of the ACR. Religious “freedom” has now been brought to a land where it was hitherto unknown. *Democratization* of the world, therefore, has almost become synonymous with *evangelizing* the world, in the minds of many American evangelicals.

Current missionary efforts in China further illustrate the extent to which the ACR has influenced American evangelical thinking. It is interesting that whether you read about China in a secular publication like *Newsweek*, or in a Christian journal like *World Magazine*, the analysis is pretty much the same. It is not surprising, therefore, that when American missionaries go to China, they are often driven by two convictions: China needs Jesus and China needs democracy.<sup>25</sup> The game plan, therefore, is to seek converts to both—not necessarily in the order listed above.

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<sup>25</sup> Many evangelical seminary professors have been invited to lecture in leading universities in China on issues like Christianity and Western culture, or Western history, Western philosophy or western literature etc. Some of these evangelical seminary professors simply went in and lectured on America being a Christian nation and the democratic system of America was based on biblical principles. I have personally been invited to attend several reports of such trips to China. Some came back and even reported that they had students come to them after their seminars and indicated they wanted to become Christians. I often like to challenge them, “Have you asked them why they wanted to become Christians, since you were not even preaching the Gospel?”

The fact that such a dual objective exists is evidenced in the way these missionaries treat the existing local church in China. Any effort to cooperate is focused almost exclusively on the “house churches” where opposition to the Communist government is assumed to be the strongest. Conversely, they will often have nothing to do with the official “registered” churches who choose to comply with their government’s requirements. Sadly, whether to cooperate or to shun a local church, therefore, is determined more by its members’ *politics*, than by the reality or superficiality of their commitment to the gospel of Jesus Christ.<sup>26</sup> It is simply assumed that the house church, with its more covert format and commitment to undermine Communist oppression and fight for individual democratic “liberty” must be faithful to the gospel. The more politically quiescent “registered” church, on the other hand, is deemed to be unfaithful to the Lord, and therefore cannot possibly enjoy his blessing—or merit their cooperation and support.

Gaining “religious freedom” for *all* of the people of China through political pressure would seem to be a higher priority than harvesting lost souls through faithful witness to the gospel. Whether to work through an existing Chinese church, therefore, is based more on assumptions about their willingness to pressure the Chinese government to adopt some version of the 1st Amendment to the US Constitution than with convincing evidence of the reality of their professed faith.

It is a cart-before-the-horse methodology. Inciting a country’s citizens to fight for “religious liberty” by waging political wars against oppressive governments is an ACR agenda, not a Gospel mandate. Nor is such political “freedom” a necessary prerequisite

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<sup>26</sup> We do not need go to China to see how true this is. If we do a little survey of some of the leading Christian magazines, such as *Christianity Today* or *World Magazine*, or from the Christian radios, or even books written by American Christians on Chinese Church, such as David Aikman’s *Jesus in Beijing: How Christianity Is Transforming China and Changing the Global Balance of Power*, (Washington D.C.: Regnery Publishing) 2003, it will not be difficult to find that American evangelical Christians by and large side with the House Church in China and speak against the Registered Churches, despite the fact that 90% of the registered churches in China hold the evangelical faith, and a large number of believers in China are simultaneously worshipping in both kinds of churches. It has been said that many evangelical seminaries are beginning to show awareness of cross-cultural problems in their missiology. Yet, it seems that the awareness remains more at the level of cultural difference, rather than the intrusion of the ACR into the missionary’s mind. If the American churches in this country are not even aware of the syncretism of the ACR and Christianity, if the voice of the Christian media in this country is undistinguishable from the American politicians and diplomats, how can we expect the missionaries to think and act differently. The American missionaries do not intentionally preach a Gospel of the ACR, I believe. They do so because they are not aware how pervasive the American Church has been invaded by the ACR.

to reaching lost souls for Christ. True “freedom” is the *result* of belief in the gospel, not a necessary precondition to its propagation. It is not “you must fight for democracy and democracy will set you free,” but “you will know the *truth*, and the *truth* will set you free” (John 8:32).

When the Jewish “authorities” arrested Peter and the other Apostles and gave them “strict orders not to teach in this name...” (Acts 5:28), they did not complain, nor try to organize their fellow citizens to fight for the “religious liberty” they were being denied. On the contrary, they bore the cruel flogging with meekness and grace and rejoiced “because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name” (Acts 5:41). Opening doors of opportunity and preparing the ground for sowing the seeds of the gospel is the work of the Holy Spirit, not of “religious” political activism. When “missionaries” bring the gospel to foreign lands with hostile governments, they must remain true to a very specific commission: to tell of the saving grace of God in Jesus Christ, and to lovingly nurture those who believe. Any potential opposition or persecution that various world powers may threaten must be left to the sovereign power of their Lord and Master who promised that in the gathering of his flock, “the gates of hades will not overcome.”

The US State Department issues an annual report<sup>27</sup> on the status of human rights in China, with a specific emphasis on “religious freedom.” This assessment, together with the increasing influence of American missionaries, has led to a gradual change in the attitude of some house churches toward the Chinese government. What was once a passive resistance has grown into an aggressive separatism and in some cases an activist role in pushing for political change.<sup>28</sup> Historically, persecutions against the followers of Jesus Christ were more severe during the period of the Cultural Revolution.<sup>29</sup> And yet, Chinese believers at that time had little to say about persecution. They received little or no aid from foreign

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<sup>27</sup> The 2004 International Religious Freedom Report on China can be found at [www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf2004/35396](http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf2004/35396).

<sup>28</sup> We are told many young Chinese are now converted to Christianity because they believe that “the movement could help hasten democratic reform in China, as it did in the former Soviet Union and Poland.” See Sarah Schafer (with Craig Simons in Hong Kong), “Onward, Christian Soldiers: Chinese Christians Missionaries Are Winning Souls across the Middle Kingdom—and Plan to Spread Even Farther,” *Newsweek*, May 10, 2004, [www.keeppmedia.Com/pubs/Newsweek/2004/05/10/499608](http://www.keeppmedia.Com/pubs/Newsweek/2004/05/10/499608), accessed, December 9, 2004.

<sup>29</sup> i.e., from 1966 to 1976.

sources, yet joyfully praised God for the privilege of serving him and devised strategies for expanding their gospel efforts. Now, with such persecution largely alleviated and foreign aid increasing, persecution stories have multiplied. What is going on? Is it simply a matter of China's new openness making it possible to circulate such stories of oppression? Or rather that these Chinese believers have learned that they can use their suffering stories as a means to gain support in the international arena in order to achieve their political ends?

Some who belong to Chinese house churches have certainly learned that American political clout can be used to their own advantage. Those who have been able to leave China and come to the US know that stories of persecution are an effective way to garner support from American Christians.<sup>30</sup> And this strategy has not gone unnoticed by Chinese dissidents.<sup>31</sup> There is no doubt that the Chinese people want political change. What is troubling is that many of these people have come to see Christianity primarily as a useful tool for achieving such political reform. American missionaries influenced by the ACR may sincerely believe that China needs democracy in order to better suit the advance of the gospel. But the Chinese to whom they bring such a compromised message have responded by looking to Christianity as a means to the desired political reform. On the surface the American and Chinese objectives seem quite similar. In reality, they represent a total inversion of ends and means.

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<sup>30</sup> Many of these former house church members are receiving both financial supports and publicity in the West. Thus it is very tempting for them to feed the kind of information the West likes to hear. Many Westerners are familiar with such names as "The Heavenly Man", Peter Xu—the so-called "Billy Graham in China," and Bob Fu, a former House Church member, the founder China Aid Association (CAA), the sole purpose of which is to tell stories of the persecutions of the House Church and to rally support from overseas to reform the political system in China. CAA is now the very source on China from which both the various American Christian magazines and the UN Human Rights Watch committee get their information and perspective on China.

<sup>31</sup> The ministry of CAA, for example, reports from time to time how the political dissidents are being treated in China. Many political dissidents, most of them non-Christians, also report in their publications stories of "persecuted Christians" in China. A good typical example of this Christian agenda mingled with political agenda is seen in an influential DVD, titled "The Cross," where a former well-known political dissident and now a converted Christian produced a documentary on the development of the Chinese Church in the past 100 years. The political overtone of what is otherwise a Christian production has caused even believers in China to challenge the motive behind the production and critiques are heard on many Internet open discussion forums.

Americans tend to believe that the “people” in other countries, be they Iraqis or Chinese, share the American dream of freedom and democracy, but that “political powers” have deprived them of these basic human rights. America needs to liberate these people, therefore, because they cannot liberate themselves. “A troubled and afflicted mankind looks to us, pleading for us to keep our rendezvous with destiny,” is the way one of America’s most loved and admired presidents expressed this conviction.<sup>32</sup> Americans can’t conceive of the possibility that there are people in other countries who don’t want democracy, nor America’s help to “liberate” them.

But are these valid assumptions? Do most of the Chinese people even understand the concept of democracy? While “persecuted” Christians in China are complaining to the world that China has no religious liberty or human rights, they themselves are persecuting other religious groups and supporting their government’s actions in crushing cultic groups such as Fa Lun Gong, Oriental Lightening, the Weepers, etc.<sup>33</sup> They claim to be the only pure church in China and are telling the world that the registered churches are the “Judas,” the “Golden Calf worshippers” whose existence must be opposed and abolished.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> See note 15 above.

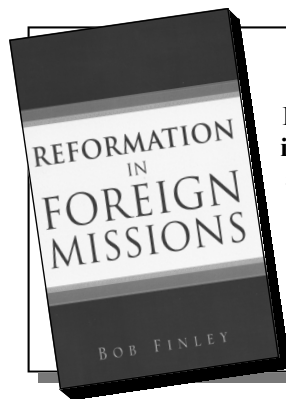
<sup>33</sup> In an article written by Sarah Schafer (with Craig Simons in Hong Kong), “Onward, Christian Soldiers: Chinese Christians Missionaries Are Winning Souls across the Middle Kingdom—and Plan to Spread Even Farther,” *Newsweek*, May 10, 2004, [www.keepmedia.com/pubs/Newsweek/2004/05/10/499608](http://www.keepmedia.com/pubs/Newsweek/2004/05/10/499608), accessed, December 9, 2004, the interviews with the House Church members indicate how intolerant they are to other religious sects. The Weepers’ movement led by Peter Xu, which has been highly supported and praised by the media in the West is condemned as a cult by the major House Church leaders in China, such as MoShan Xie in Beijing and Pastor Lamb in Guangdong Province. Xie wrote, “When the government finally arrested Peter Xu, his sister Yongling Xu and his followers, we rejoiced, but only to find ourselves speechless when we heard Christians from overseas are demanding their release.” See his most well-known article, “The True Face of the Weepers’ Movement” and “The Reality of the Chinese Church.” can be found at many Chinese Internet sites such as [www.cclw.net/gospel/new/csp.html](http://www.cclw.net/gospel/new/csp.html), and <http://members.aol.com/hvccn/store/hwashar/b5/article4.htm>, accessed on December 9, 2004.

<sup>34</sup> Some of the Chinese House Churches have produced a DVD, called *The Religion of the Golden Calf* to circulate among the believers from both the House Churches and Registered Churches. The Scripts of the lectures in the DVD is prepared by Joe Zhou, titled “Why Must You Not Join the Three-Self Church?” It is also available on the Chinese Internet at [www.cclife.org/htdocs/cclif.nst/0/993126CF430AA9585256E4100226303?OpenDocument](http://www.cclife.org/htdocs/cclif.nst/0/993126CF430AA9585256E4100226303?OpenDocument). The DVD basically says the Registered Churches are of Satan and all true believers should come out of them and join the only pure church and be faithful to it, namely the House Church.

Democratic societies cannot be created simply by changing the political structure. The “people” must first come to understand the personal implications of a democracy. From a biblical perspective, it is only *after* the hearts of people are changed by the Gospel of Jesus Christ that they are spiritually empowered to respect one another, recognize their duties to each other, protect the interests of the minority and learn all of the other virtues necessary to function as a truly “one another” (i.e., democratic) society. Genuine social-cultural-political transformation is the *fruit* of an effective gospel witness, therefore, not a necessary precondition.

We should have learned this lesson from the recent history of several former communist countries. There were reports that when the Communist regimes were in power in Poland, East Germany and Romania, the church was active and growing. Christians in the West touted it as the work of God through his people in spite of political oppression. Was it really? Or was it rather that the church was seen by those who sought to overthrow Communism as a convenient vehicle to achieve their cause? If there had been true spiritual revivals prior to the fall of Communism, then where are those revivals now? The fact is, that the same people who courted the church as a convenient ally in their *political* causes, were just as quick to discard the church once their cause had been achieved.

In the same way, there are current reports of “revival” in China. Do we not need to pay attention to the lessons of history? The same pattern seen in Poland, East Germany and Romania could very well be repeated in China. If we allow the Christian Church to be used for *political* agendas, once those objectives have been achieved, the Chinese people, too, will have no more use for the church and also discard it as irrelevant.



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The present Chinese government is not ignorant of the political agenda of foreign missionaries. In fact, they are viewed as foreign political agents in a religious disguise. Interestingly, the Chinese government does not oppose Christianity as a religion *per se*. A recent report by the Taiwanese press pointed out that the Christian Bible is one of twelve readings recommended by the government for college students.<sup>35</sup> What the Chinese government *is* wary of is Christianity as a *political* force.<sup>36</sup> This begs the question: how is it that such an inherently *apolitical* Gospel has become so highly politically charged? The answer, of course, is that it is not true Christianity that is so politically subversive, but the ACR agenda that the church is wittingly or unwittingly preaching along with, if not overshadowing, the true Gospel.

The ACR is, after all, the *American* Civil Religion. It primarily reflects the political interests of America. But America does not have a monopoly on nationalism or patriotism. Today, Chinese Christians welcome the help of American missionaries because American international clout is useful in pursuing their own religio-political goals. But China as a nation is becoming stronger in the international community. In time, it will begin to view America as a competitor, if not a threat to its own political-economic goals. At that time, the Chinese people will no longer court American favor, but reject it. If American missionaries who have a genuine concern for the Chinese people do not make an extra effort to separate themselves from the ACR agenda and focus on the true Gospel of Jesus Christ, they will surely become the instruments of their own evangelistic demise. I can assure you that if the present approach to missions is not changed, on the day that China rejects America, it will also reject Christianity.

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<sup>35</sup> “The Bible for the first time is listed among the students’ recommended readings in China” [www.christianpost.com.tw/2004-10-26](http://www.christianpost.com.tw/2004-10-26). Everyday, thousands of believers get on the Internet, especially the college students whose lives center around computers, and openly ask questions about the interpretations of the Bible, the Christian doctrines, apologetics, cults, Christian living, Church and state issues, Christianity and Chinese culture and so on. I myself have been engaging with them through the Internet for about two years. To list a few of these discussion forums here: <http://bbs.loves7.com/index.php>; [www.zanmei.net/bbs/index.php](http://www.zanmei.net/bbs/index.php). Not only so, all of the leading universities are openly inviting Christians from overseas to go to their universities to lecture on Christianity-related topics and to train church leaders for China. The reports of religious persecutions we hear in the West simply do not square with the extent of religious freedom inside China. Even the late Jonathan Chao, the founder of China Missions International (CMI), the militant supporter of the House Church, had to instruct his organization to change their focus from persecutions of the House Church members to the illegitimacy of the Registered Church.

<sup>36</sup> As Chris Marsh insightfully perceives in Chapter 5 “Learning from Your Comrade’s Mistakes,” of his forthcoming book on China and Russia.

### ***Conclusion***

My primary purpose has not been to incite opposition to the American Civil Religion, nor to suggest that believers should never work with unbelievers in promoting societal well-being. What I am concerned about is that the increasing support and participation in ACR agendas by American Christians is contributing to the subordination of Christianity to the ACR, defiling its most basic and essential doctrines and practices in the process. This is not only hurting the church in America, but, as we have seen, is doing great damage to the true cause of the gospel world wide. That Christ will certainly prevail in building his church is not in question. “I will build my church and the gates of Hades will not overcome it...All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away” (Mat. 16:18; John 6:37). That Satan will oppose the advance of the gospel on every front is also a given. But that professing believers *themselves* have become his unwitting pawns should be a wake-up call to all who truly believe that “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name [or religion or leader or agenda or cause or creed or government or bill of rights] under heaven given to men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

- ***Virginia C. Yip***

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Virginia Yip was born in Communist China during the Cultural Revolution. As a young woman, she was a leader of Mao’s “Little Guard,” with hundreds of “Red Guard” youngsters under her authority. After the Cultural Revolution ended, her family moved to Hong Kong where she first heard the gospel and became a believer.

Her early years as a Christian were difficult. Not only was her relationship with her unbelieving, atheistic family strained, but her natural penchant for asking questions was squelched by the fellowship she was attending. Twice, in fact, her request to be baptized was denied because she “asked too many questions.”

Then she met a Reformed Indonesian Chinese preacher who actually *encouraged* questions—before and after his sermons. Virginia soon discovered that her God was much smaller than his and wanted to understand Christianity the way he did. He was very instrumental in helping to form the biblical basis for her present theological convictions.

After high school, Virginia attended the Chinese University of Hong Kong and was selected to go to the US as an exchange student. While in America, she studied linguistics and was awarded an MA. She also took advantage of this time to more fully explore the “Reformed Faith.”

When Virginia learned that her father was ill, she returned to Hong Kong. While there, she accepted a position at the Hong Kong University where she taught for several years. During that time she also enrolled as an external student at London University and earned an LLB in law. She was also awarded an LLM in Comparative Law by the City University of Hong Kong and another LLM in European Community Law from the Aix-Marxelle University in France. She considered pursuing a PhD in law, but a Chinese Reformed Theology educator urged her to first lay a solid theological foundation, so she enrolled at Westminster Theological Seminary and earned an MAR (Master of Arts in Religion).

Currently, Virginia is furthering her studies at Baylor University in Waco, Texas. Her goal is to bring her legal and theological background into a useful harmony by pursuing a PhD in Baylor’s one-of-a-kind program in Church and State Studies. “The American Civil Religion” article we adapted for this edition of *Searching Together* is based on an essay she researched and wrote as a course requirement.

We have written and published a number of articles in recent years about the corrupting influence that the politically oriented agendas of the Religious Right are having on professing believers in America and on the effectiveness of their gospel witness, at home and abroad. Virginia’s excellent essay adds new perspectives and unique insights into this problem from the vantage point of a native Chinese believer who is well-qualified to assess the damage that American missionaries infected by “ACR” objectives and methodologies are doing to the cause of the gospel in her own homeland and around the world.