

95 Theses On the Nationalistic Idolatry of Churches in the United States

Written By Kingdom Now, January 2002
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Summary:

The tragedies of 11 September 2001 are grievous not only for the lives taken by terrorists, but also because their aftermath has powerfully revealed that we, the Church in the United States, have prostrated ourselves before the idol of our nation. Thus, it is with great sadness that the endorsers of this document humbly plead with our churches to join us in repentance, turning from the United States' twisted notions of liberty, democracy and justice, from the historical misconceptions of its "Christian heritage" and from the ubiquitous greed that drives our nation. Jesus is calling his people in the United States today to grieve the sins of our nation, to return to our first love, and to once again recognize him alone as our King and the provider of our security.

Out of love and concern for the truth, and with the object of eliciting it, the following theses are submitted to the Church in the United States for public discussion, under the guidance of the endorsers of this document. We request that discussion on this matter be directed to: discuss@kingdomnow.org.

1. When our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ said, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand," he called us to become citizens of His Kingdom.
2. This Kingdom to which we are called cannot properly be understood as equivalent to any worldly kingdom (nation or empire) -- cf., Jn 18:36, Lk 17:20-21.
3. Thus, the United States of America is not the Kingdom of God, nor did it ever have any special place -- as a nation -- in that Kingdom.
4. Furthermore, the United States, despite the manifold references to "God" in its defining documents, never recognizes Jesus as part of the Godhead it proclaims.
5. Despite its thoroughly religious character, the United States also never makes any pretension of allegiance to Jesus and to his will for establishing a kingdom here on Earth (Mt 6:10).
6. The Founding Fathers of the United States -- despite their unanimous theism -- held a wide spectrum of religious beliefs, and the claim that they all were disciples of Jesus is a dangerous falsehood grounded in boastful mythology that arose in the early nineteenth century.
7. Even those few Founding Fathers who did profess to follow Christ, generally yielded to the Enlightenment spirit of that day and understood their faith in very private, individualized terms.
8. Thus, they downplayed or ignored the socio-political reality of the Church (God's people) as the Kingdom proclaimed, and established, by Jesus.
9. Therefore, the only vestige of the Christian faith that we find exhibited in the documents that established the United States are moral and legal imperatives condensed from the Scriptures.
10. However, the Founding Fathers did not adopt the moral and legal principles of the Scriptures as a whole, but rather selectively drew upon principles that fit their vision.
11. Thus, Scriptural principles that were not consistent with their worldly philosophies (economics, Enlightenment individualism, etc.) -- e.g., the social and economic justice of the Jubilee -- were discarded.

12. Even if the Founding Fathers had embraced the whole of Scriptural law (and yet refused to recognize Christ), the United States would not be a Christian Nation, for as the Apostle Paul reminds us (Rom. 3:20ff, Eph. 2:8-9, etc.) the basis of Christianity is faith in Christ's gospel of grace, not Law.
13. Therefore, the Founding Fathers, by clinging to the philosophies of their day and thus relegating faith to the private sphere and by choosing a selective approach to the Scriptures, created in essence a space in which a new religion could arise.
14. As the nineteenth century progressed and as the United States grew as an economic and political power -- and at the same time, as the church was waning as a cultural institution-- a new religion did emerge, one which astute scholars have labeled the "American Civil Religion."
15. The highest value of this American civil religion is not Christianity's love for Yahweh and neighbor, but rather personal liberty.
16. For us, the followers of Jesus, liberty is a virtue, but it is not the highest virtue.
17. Indeed, Jesus's statement that "You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free" reminds us that true liberty comes only through Christ (who calls himself the "Truth," John 14:6) and thus that liberty must take a backseat to Christ-like love.
18. Furthermore, the true freedom that we experience as a result of knowing and obeying Jesus (I Jn 2:3) is not something that a worldly government can either grant or deny.
19. Beginning with the American Revolution, the United States' relentless pursuit of liberty has been the cause of most of its wars, in which hundreds of thousands of lives have been taken -- including those of many Christians.
20. In contrast, Jesus himself distinguished His Kingdom from worldly ones by stating that His Kingdom needed no violence to defend it (Jn. 18:36).
21. Jesus's words therefore remind us again that the United States is not the Kingdom of God, and that the God in which it trusts is not the triune Yahweh.
22. Thus, it is not difficult to see that this new American religion centered on liberty required a god shaped in its own image, an idol quite distinct from the triune God of the Christian faith.
23. This god, although he bore some resemblance to Yahweh, was more reminiscent of the ideological god of the eighteenth century philosophers and was strikingly characterized by the highest virtues of their humanism.
24. Robert Bellah has described this idol: "The god of the civil religion is not only rather 'unitarian,' he is also on the austere side, much more related to order, law and right than to salvation and love."
25. Although the Founding Fathers did not intend to replace Christianity with a civil religion, they did expect that, at least for the nation's leaders, Christianity would be subordinated to the will of the State (Robert Bellah has said: "(In the United States,) the national magistrate, whatever his private religious views, operates under the rubrics of the civil religion as long as he is in his official capacity.")
26. Despite the intentions of the Founding Fathers, Jesus has made it clear that his followers (in the United States or elsewhere) cannot simultaneously serve two masters for they will end up loving one and hating the other-- cf. Mt 6:24, Lk. 16:13.
27. Thus, American governmental officials who profess Christ (and particularly those at the highest levels) find themselves straining to serve two masters and we, the Church, should not look to them as a heroes of the Christian faith or as prophets speaking God's words to His people.
28. The American civil religion, with its idolatrous images of the divine, has survived throughout the history of the United States because it is useful for blinding and deceiving the Church.
29. For America to retain its power, we the Church must be deceived for as Herbert Richardson has said: "The real limitation on the power of the state is its citizens' loyalty to and participation in groups whose membership, goals and procedures are not isomorphic or consistent with the membership, goals and procedures of the state."
30. Following in the pattern of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, we -- the churches in the United States -- have been greatly deceived by lies grounded in pride.
31. We have fallen prey to the presumptuous notion that our nation is God's chosen people; this proud lie no doubt has numerous roots including the early Puritan view that understood the

American colonies as a "New Israel" and the Founding Fathers' choice to claim a divine origin for the fundamental values and laws of the nation.

32. The pride that we express as a Church in "the American way of life" wreaks havoc upon the fundamental equality and unity that undergirds Yahweh's universal Church -- cf. Gal. 3:28.
33. Indeed, many Christians around the world -- e.g., in Germany or in Vietnam -- have been hated or even killed as a result of the nationalistic pride of the United States, which is always at its highest levels during times of war.
34. Such nationalistic pride is incompatible with our calling to follow Jesus's example of humility, "considering others better than ourselves" (Phil. 2:3).
35. Indeed, in the Old Testament, pride was a prominent symbol of the lack of God's favor upon a person or a nation (cf. Ps 94:1-2, Pr 16:19, Is 2:12).
36. Thus, we -- the Church in the U.S. -- must carefully weigh nationalistic petitions for God to bless America against the biblical understanding of Yahweh as one who "opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble" (James 4:6).
37. We also have been deceived into looking to its government for security -- instead of looking to Yahweh.
38. It is Yahweh who created us and it is Yahweh who will sustain us and protect us (cf. Mt. 6:25-34).
39. Jesus told us that our primary calling as the Church is to seek first His Kingdom -- not a worldly Kingdom -- and when we do so, we are promised that our needs will be met (Mt 6:33).
40. Although the United States and other nations may set themselves up as providers of sustenance and security, we the Church must always remember that the power that Yahweh allows a nation to have is minuscule in comparison to Yahweh's omnipotence.
41. Thus, the Scriptures provide us with images of Yahweh scoffing at nations (Ps. 2) and considering them as "less than nothing and emptiness" (Is. 40:17).
42. We must therefore understand the United States of America, as a "kingdom" of this world, in light of these Scriptural images, and thus treat it with a healthy dose of caution.
43. However, we the Church do have a clear biblical responsibility to lovingly respect and to pray for the governing authorities (cf. Rom. 12:14-13:8, I Tim. 2:1-2).
44. Maintaining an attitude of "loving respect" however does not mean that we have an obligation to endorse the government or to unconditionally approve of all its policies; neither does it mean that we should unquestioningly obey every one of the nation's edicts.
45. Indeed, our primary responsibility is to be obedient to the triune God, for it is Yahweh, and not the United States, who dictates what is right.
46. Thus, the spirit of love reminds us that if -- in a situation where the righteousness of Yahweh and the righteousness of the nation conflict-- we choose to obey Yahweh, then we should be prepared to face the wrath of the state.
47. However, if we suffer, are imprisoned or even die for our insistence on being obedient to Jesus, we are blessed by Yahweh (cf. I Pet 2:19-21, Mt 5:10).
48. Our call to lovingly respect the governing authorities of the nation, also dictates that we should not angrily demonize the government, but instead mourn the sins of her nation.
49. We, the Church in the United States, have also been deceived about the way in which Yahweh's blessing is poured out; viz., economic wealth is rarely a sign of God's blessing.
50. And in those instances where Yahweh does bless a person or people with wealth, the intent is that that wealth should be lavished upon others, not stored up (Mt. 6:19-21, I Tim. 6:5-11, Lk. 3:11).
51. Indeed, the New Testament image of the Church's economics is one characterized by sharing (Greek, "koinonia"), not by greed or the amassing of capital (cf. Acts 2:44-45, 4:32, I John 1:6-7).
52. In contrast, the power of the United States has come through economic domination as much as it has through political domination.
53. Thus, the nation of the United States with its wealth -- especially relative to the rest of the world -- must be regarded by the Church with caution for money is a powerful force and one that easily can become a false god (cf. Mt 6:24).

54. After encountering the rich young ruler, Jesus remarked to his disciples that: "It will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven" (Mt. 19:23).
55. Similarly, it would seem equally difficult for a wealthy nation to attain a favorable status in the Kingdom that Jesus proclaimed.
56. Thus, in light of the United States' wealth, we must examine critically any claim that the U.S. is favored by Yahweh.
57. In accord with the Scriptural principle that conflict and wars often have their origins in greed (Jam. 4:1-2), the affluence of the United States has been a major contributing factor to both the wars it waged abroad (e.g., in the Persian Gulf, to protect its access to oil) and its excessive spending on the defense of its own soil.
58. The rich young ruler, held captive by his own greed, made a decisive choice to not follow Jesus, and a good case can be made that the United States has done likewise.
59. We the Church have, in many cases, also been blinded to the fact that the United States is not a democracy.
60. From its earliest days to the present, from the male Colonial land-owners to Corporations and lobby groups, the power in the United States has always rested primarily in the hands of the wealthy.
61. Furthermore, the United States historically has never completely succeeded at protecting the basic rights of its most powerless minorities: from Native Americans to Blacks to Women to the unborn.
62. Despite the fact that -- in the words of Frederick Douglass -- the United States' own claims of equality and democracy are "hollow mockery," it hypocritically has been quick to take up arms in defense of democracy abroad (Korea, Vietnam, etc.).
63. Indeed, democracy -- even in its purest incarnation -- is not the modus operandi of the Kingdom of God, for our sovereign and omnipotent King Yahweh loves all people and thus has a special concern for the marginalized minority (cf. Lk. 4:16-20).
64. Thus, we the Church in the United States must be careful not to put too high of a value on democracy, lest visions of this earthly form of government obscure the sovereignty of God.
65. Furthermore, we as God's chosen people -- for whom mere anger is a grave sin (cf. Mt 5:21-22) - - cannot endorse wars waged in the name of earthly ideals including democracy.
66. Justice, like democracy and liberty, is another ideal that the United States is quick to defend.
67. The Scriptures are unquestionably clear that Yahweh is a God who delights in justice (cf. Is. 5:16, 30:8, Mic. 6:8, etc.).
68. However, genuine justice must be grounded in Truth, not half-truths, rumors, speculations or propaganda.
69. We, the Church in the United States, have a responsibility to act like the Church in Berea (Acts 17:10-11), carefully examining in the light of the Scriptures the claims that are brought before it.
70. Thus, given that the concepts of liberty and democracy that the United States presents are flawed, we should be particularly careful when the United States makes appeals to justice.
71. One of our fundamental principles as the Church is that humanity is deeply flawed (or "fallen"), and therefore that any human claims to truth (and thus justice also) must be made in humility, admitting the possibility of error.
72. Therefore, we must also carefully examine the attitude with which the United States (or any government) makes appeals to justice.
73. The Old Testament law, in sanctioning "an eye for an eye," thus limits the scope of just retribution to no more than was taken.
74. Thus, we the Church who have been called by Jesus to an even higher standard than that of the Old Testament (Mt. 5:38-42), must resist initiatives of retaliatory rage that seek to be increasingly destructive, for we cannot both love Yahweh and hatefully destroy other human beings (I Jn. 4:20).
75. Although we the Church share Jesus's longing for justice, we must recognize in humility that our pursuit of justice must be subordinated to our faithfulness in following Jesus, the Prince of Peace.

76. Indeed, faithfulness to Jesus and to the building of his Kingdom is our primary calling, and we can no longer adulterously serve two masters: Jesus and the United States.
77. Sadly, the tragedies of 11 September 2001 have unearthed a massive vein of nationalism in our churches in the United States.
78. Jesus's Church, like the Israelites in the promised land, is called to be a holy --set apart-- people in the midst of their pagan neighbors (Deut. 7:6, 1 Pet 2:9).
79. However, since September 11, our churches in the U.S. have become exponentially more vocal about praising and defending our own golden calf: the United States.
80. We are thus in grave danger for one of our fundamental principles is that we are neither to craft nor to worship any false gods (cf. Ex 20:1-5).
81. Today more than ever, God's people in the United States need to hear the words of Jesus: "Repent! For the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand."
82. The Greek word in this verse that is translated "Repent!" literally indicates a changing of mind.
83. The Church in the United States needs Jesus to transform us by renewing and changing our minds, in order that we may no longer be conformed to the worldly culture of the United States (Rom. 12:2).
84. The Scriptures promise the Church that if we confess our sins, Yahweh -- who is faithful and just - - will "forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 Jn. 1:9).
85. Therefore, we, the Church in the United States, must confess that we have fallen for the proud lies of nationalism.
86. Furthermore, we need forgiveness for the patriotic idols that we have crafted and for our arrogance in relating to other nations.
87. We must also confess that we have trusted in our nation to bring us sustenance and security and that we have been slaves to wealth and greed.
88. If we humble ourselves before Yahweh, the blood of Jesus will cleanse us, even from the blood on our hands from the lives that we have taken to appease our idols (liberty, democracy and the United States).
89. Jesus will not only cleanse us, but will also free us from our economic enslavement to greed and from our political enslavement to lies and arrogance.
90. Thus, forgiven, cleansed and freed, we may once again pledge our allegiance, in word and in deed, to Jesus's Kingdom alone.
91. And in recognizing Jesus as King, we must have loving respect at all times for those who govern our land, and especially at those times when we disagree with them.
92. We, the Church in the United States, must come to Yahweh in true humility, admitting our many sins and asking Jesus to reign once again as our sole King and Master.
93. For it is the Church's foremost desire that Yahweh's Kingdom come and the will of God be done on Earth as it is in heaven!
94. To this end, the Church -- once cleansed -- must commit to being zealous in following Christ, their King, through penalties, imprisonments, and deaths.
95. And let us be more confident of entering heaven through these many tribulations than through the false assurance of security that the United States provides.