

A Compact Road Map of American History

Part 1 of 3

By Rich Lusk

Author's Introductory Note: Engaging in broad historical interpretation as I am about to do is always risky. Necessarily, one "stylizes" history by simplifying, over generalizing, and stereotyping. But the narrative qualities of history are not simply due to the imposition of human rationality upon brute facts; rather history is always already narrativized because it unfolds according to the eternal counsel of the Divine Storyteller. The role of the human mind is to discern the trends and threads that give the plotline its overall shape. In doing so, of course, we necessarily leave a lot of facts on the cutting room floor. Only God has the full and perfect interpretation of history. It's one thing to say that history is really God's story; it's another thing altogether to claim to know how all the scenes in the drama fit together into a coherent, beautiful whole. Painting with such a broad brush, as we will be doing, can be dangerous, but becomes acceptable if the author and readers understand the limitations. We're only trying to give the big picture.

The Nation with Soul?

It's been said that America is the nation with the soul of a church. More truthfully, we might say America is the nation with the complex of a Messiah. And while this messianic complex has been greatly secularized, it still persists in various forms and manifestations. How we got to where we are today from our starting point as a nation is a long and twisted tale. We cannot tell that whole story here, but looking at some aspects of the plotline should be helpful. Getting a handle on the shape and flow of American history is critical in understanding what moves the church needs to make at the present time in order to stay in the game.

The Puritan settlers who first ventured to America's shores were thoroughly ecclesiocentric and theocratic. They inherited this church-centered view of society under Christ's lordship from Calvin, Bucer, Knox, and the other shining lights of the Reformation, who had in turn inherited it from the Constantinian/Augustinian order of Medieval Christendom. The Puritan settlers came not simply to escape religious persecution or to seek wealth, but to establish a "city on a hill," a holy commonwealth that would serve as a model for other nations within Christendom to follow. In a sense, they came because they wanted to play their part in the unfolding drama of Christendom.

One rather prominent example must suffice. Cotton Mather, a great Puritan pastor in seventeenth century New England, is generally regarded as one of the most brilliant men to ever live on this continent. Because of his vast knowledge and wisdom, he was frequently consulted by political rulers and became quite a statesman. All the while, though, he never lost sight of the lordship of Christ over the state or the centrality of the church and her ordinances in a Christian culture. In the words of George Grant,

He constantly reaffirmed what he believed to be a biblical verity: those social and political changes are always driven by a magnification of the ministries of the local church, not the other way around. He believed cultural and political activism were secondary to parish life, the life of the worshipping community of the local church, and if Americans lost this priority of the local parish church and its worship assembly, then the American experiment in liberty was doomed to fail.

Once, when called to testify before the colony's governor, he said,

I tell you sir, unless your priorities are set aright by the gospel of grace, the hope of liberty we now have shall be surrendered. I tell you sir, sober yourself in the good news of the gospel, lest we all be dragged off in chains.

Mather knew, as did most Puritans, that a strong institutional church was necessary to the maintenance of political liberty. As the church went, so the world would go – sooner or later.

The Loss of Ecclesiocentrism: Two Factors

Several forces eventually undermined this ecclesiocentric view. Over a several century period, Western civilization was reconfigured, removing the church from her role as the core institution in society. The cultural map was redrawn, such that the church went from being the capital city to “life in the backwoods.”

It is crucial we come to grips with the factors that produced this dramatic shift. In large measure, the rise of *revivalism* caused the church to crumble from within. Revivalism degraded the role of the clergy (largely through leaving them uneducated), de-emphasized sacramental worship (in favor of big tent “circus” style meetings), ignored the church's theological heritage, particularly Calvinism (since tradition was regarded as crippling and confining to the “Spirit”), focused on experience rather than truth (often stirred up by means of emotionally manipulative sappy, sentimental hymns and choruses), and catered to the sovereign individual rather than building up the community (thus, playing right into the hands of the American frontier's “self-made man” image). The church aided and abetted her own displacement from the center of cultural life to the periphery. This self-imposed marginalization has left the church with little or no social visibility or influence. Culturally, she is now largely irrelevant.

However, our focus in this series of essays will be on a second factor, namely, the emergence *nationalism*. The architects of the modern secular state, men such as Hobbes and Locke, forced the church into the mold of a “voluntary organization” and privatized religion into a personal (in the sense of non-communal, non-institutional) relationship. As the church moved to the fringe of society, the newly created secular state rushed in to fill the void.

In Europe, the so-called religious wars rocked society at its foundations. Religious dissent in the wake of the Reformation put a tremendous strain on culture throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 supposedly brought the age of religious warfare to an end, but in the process also did something else significant: by removing religion from the sphere of public truth, the modern secular state was birthed. (One of the sad ironies in this whole shift, of course, is that the secular state has shed far more blood than the religious wars ever did.)

To greatly simplify, the logic ran something like this: somehow, peace between various warring religious factions in the post-Reformational situation had to be maintained. The newly formed secular state, theoretically religiously neutral and ecclesiastically uncommitted, would take over this role. This newly created state would in turn be governed by another Enlightenment creation, namely, universal reason.

Thus, in Europe, the modern state arose directly out of the disunity of the church. Once upon a time, the religious consensus of Christendom had provided the culture’s stability and cohesion. One faith, one Lord, one baptism had been the glue that held society together. Now that older consensus had evaporated. A weakened, fragmented church required a strong, centralized, secular state to maintain order and keep peace.

Obviously much more could be said about the situation in Europe. But we will focus our attention on the shift that took place in America. The European story sheds light on the American story, though on this continent, religious strife never escalated to quite the same level (though the conflict of 1861-1865 came close).

George Will says the founding fathers

wished to tame and domesticate religious passions of the sort that convulsed Europe . . . [Jefferson] held that ‘operations of the mind are not subject to legal coercion, but that ‘acts of the body’ are. ‘Mere belief,’ says Jefferson, ‘in one god or 20, neither picks one’s pockets nor breaks one’s legs.’

For Jefferson, religion is by nature disembodied and Gnostic, sectarian and individualistic. It is ‘mere belief,’ rather a way of life, incarnated in communal practices. Again, according to Will, this view

rests on Locke’s principle . . . that religion can be useful or can be disruptive, but its truth cannot be established by reason. Hence, Americans would not ‘establish’

religion. Rather, by guaranteeing free exercise of religions, they would make religion private and subordinate.

The privatization of religion and the politicization of public life meant that the long standing practice of church establishment would be challenged and eventually overturned in America. An established church meant that the state formally recognized, identified with, supported, and even sought counsel from a particular ecclesial body. The church had basically been established in the West, in one form or another, from the time of Constantine onwards. Thus, disestablishment was a radical step. Martin Marty has suggested this has been the most basic change in ecclesiological administration since Constantine!

By the early nineteenth century, the last of the state churches in the United States was being dismantled. While the establishment system had its problems – many of them rather severe – it at least guaranteed the church would be a cultural force. How the church used her cultural power, then, was simply a matter of faithfulness. But there was no question the church would be a major player in shaping the culture. She was inescapably public.

Disestablishment played a vital role in the de-centering of the church in American society and the secularization of public life. Ann Douglas says,

Between 1820 and 1875 [the years following disestablishment], the Protestant church in this country was transformed from a traditional institution which claimed with a certain real justification to be a guide and leader to the American nation into an influential ad hoc organization which obtained its power largely by taking its cues from the non-ecclesiastical culture on which it came to depend.

In other words, from that point on, the church would no longer set the agenda for the nation. Rather the nation would set the agenda and ask for the church's rubber stamp. Whatever influence the church was able to maintain was kept at the price of compromise. The church would no longer exercise any genuine prophetic leadership role in cultural formation. From the early nineteenth century onwards, America would accomplish her goals without reference to the church, without the church playing any key part in the American drama. The church was demoted from playing the lead part to working on stage props behind the scenes.

Over time, in our collective consciousness, loyalty to the American nation came to replace loyalty to the church. There is nothing wrong with patriotism, of course, kept in its place. But the form of patriotism that arose in America has been quite problematic. "One nation, indivisible" replaced "one Lord, one faith, one baptism" as the chief point of integration for our diverse nation. In the minds of many, America became a sort of "Redeemer Nation" and, as Peter Leithart has said, "the primary instrument of God's meaningful activity in the world." The nation itself became the primary society in terms of which Americans found their individual and group identity.

It is not necessary or possible for us to investigate all the historical details of this shift. Instead, we will turn to Richard Bushman, who summarizes the turn of events quite nicely:

[After the Great Awakening] the civil authority was the sole institution binding society . . . The state was the symbol of social coherence, as once the Established churches had been. Group solidarity depended on loyalty to the government. United action in the wars of 1745 and 1756 restored a society rent with religious schisms . . . [and] assured religious dissenters they were not totally isolated from their community. Patriotism helped to heal ecclesiastical wounds.

Bushman's last sentence is the key to understanding the loss of ecclesiocentrism and the rise of statism in America: *Patriotism helped heal ecclesiastical wounds*. Those five words encapsulate all that really needs to be said about American history from 1750 to the present. Americans have progressively put the nation in the position once rightfully occupied by the church, a process that was greatly accelerated in the early nineteenth century after the process of disestablishment was complete. And, because we would not have *mother church*, we got the *nanny state*, with her false promise of cradle to grave security. Because the church was set aside as the primary institution in American social life, the nation became the substitute as God's central agent in history. As several scholars have pointed out, *the secularization of American public life was due directly to a failed ecclesiology*. Again, patriotism effectively replaced loyalty to the church, with devastating consequences.

The change in American self-consciousness produced a corresponding change in our sense of national purpose and mission. No longer would America serve the higher calling of being a holy commonwealth, a church-shaped, church-driven society, as the Puritans had envisioned. No longer would our nation's fundamental purpose be to serve as home base for the discipling of the nations. No longer would she see her own story as part of the larger narrative of the kingdom of God. Rather our mission would become (paraphrasing Woodrow Wilson) to make the world safe for our particular brand of liberal democracy. America would take on the role of world policeman, albeit a policeman with no explicitly Christian moral base any longer. She would play the game of empire.

At this point we need to be careful, because both the neo-cons and the isolationists of our day tend towards extremes. Empire building per se is not necessarily evil. In the Old Creation, God seems to approve of several world empires (e.g., Babylon, Persia, etc.) at least in a qualified way. A biblical philosophy of politics does not necessarily entail isolationism, though it does warn about the dangers of entangling alliances. Of course, there are certain problems that come with building an empire, even if it's an unofficial one as in the case of America. Some of America's actions as "empire" have been positive, some negative. To the extent that our nation is officially committed to a pluralistic non-Christian stance, one that does not acknowledge the kingship of Jesus, everything we do stands under judgment. It goes without saying that in the New Creation, the only ultimate and lasting international empire is Christ's kingdom.

However we view the legitimacy of American foreign policy in the twentieth century, there is no question a fundamental shift in our corporate identity as a nation has taken place. Instead of having our trademark as the sending out of missionaries to make peace through the gospel, we would send out our armies to make peace with the sword. As Richard John Neuhaus has suggested, none of this denies that America has been a force for good in the world, even through her military operations at times. The point here is not to slam the American nation; there is much in our history to be thankful for and the residue of our Christian heritage has still not completely dried out. But it must be admitted on the whole that there has been a profound shift for the worse in America's self-understanding, a shift away from a church-based society to a form of nationalism that borders on idolatry.

“Americanism,” then, has increasingly displaced ecclesial Christianity as the fundamental religious outlook in our culture. That is to say, Americans have more and more looked to the American nation as such rather than the church as the focus of God's action in the world and as the agent of God's redemption in history. Phillip Lee catalogs this trend in *Against the Protestant Gnostics*:

Following the Civil War, Henry Ward Beecher, the most prominent clergyman of the period, boasted: “This continent is to be from this time forth governed by Northern men, with Northern ideas, and with a Northern gospel.” This immodest claim would prove to be prophetic, for not only had the Union army crushed the Confederacy, but also “Northern” evangelicalism in both its revivalistic and liberal forms would virtually annihilate any alternative spiritual expressions which tried to exert themselves in a public way.

That a notable minister would so intertwine the gospel with Yankee nationalism is telling. The so-called Civil War meant, among other things, the triumph of revivalism over the public church and statism over decentralized politics.

From the mid-nineteenth century forwards, Americans would expect less and less from their churches and more and more from an ever increasing national government. In time, this political hubris over spilled its national banks into international politics. Again, Lee provides a handy summary:

The conviction that the salvation of souls throughout the world depends on the salvation of the American soul has been a continuing evangelical theme. Thomas Skinner, Presbyterian clergyman and professor of homiletics, declared in 1843 that “the moral condition of the United States is to decide that of the world.” President Woodrow Wilson, despite all that had taken place since Skinner's time, could still affirm: “America was born a Christian nation for the purpose of exemplifying to the nations of the world the principles of righteousness found in the Word of God.”

That America is a “nation with the soul of a church” is a well-established theme among historians. What is often overlooked by historians is the extent to which Protestants of all stripes have offered support to the essentially elitist notion that Americans are God’s chosen people . . .

With the collapse of the great colonial empires of Spain, Portugal, Holland, France, and Britain, the United States had the obligation of moving into that vacuum lest the world fall under the domination of a monolithic Soviet tyranny. Whether “manifest destiny” or “American hegemony,” it amounts to the same thing. American Protestantism feels that the United States is a chosen nation with the burden of the world on its shoulders.

This notion that the salvation of the world hinges on America has infected Christians across the liberal/conservative spectrum. While America has played, in the general providence of God, an important role on the world scene the last couple of centuries, we can hardly claim to be the world’s savior. While we may have kept communism in check, we have been guilty of grave moral sins ourselves. It is important that we refocus the biblical doctrines of election, world empire, and international peacemaker on the institutional church rather than the American nation. The church, not America, is God’s gift to planet earth.

Our national hubris is also clearly seen in the shape that American civil religion now takes. Of course, some kind of national faith, or civil religion, is inescapable. But today, the only kind of faith that can be publicly practiced in America is one that is secular and politically correct. There is tremendous pressure to privatize and individualize Christianity – but of course, once this is done, the robust faith described in the Scriptures has been mangled and distorted beyond recognition. Again, this privatizing squeeze is due in large measure to the collapse of a strong institutional church and the rise of our peculiar form of nationalism. As George Will has put it so succinctly, “religion [in America] is perfectly free as long as it is perfectly private – mere belief – but it must bend to the political will (law) as regards conduct.” In other words, the church dare not seek to present the gospel as public truth determinative for society as a whole. At this point, more needs to be said about the earlier historical currents that produced such a change. *To be continued.*