

A Compact Road Map of American History

Part 3 of 3

By Rich Lusk

Where do we go from here?

Depending on one's perspective, the American story can plausibly be interpreted in different ways. Looked at from *past to present*, we can see a great deal of continuity from medieval Christendom and the Reformation to America's founding. The War for Independence, after all, was largely led by the "black robed regiment" of the colonial clergy. Arguments for secession from the British Empire were drawn from Calvin and other Reformational thinkers. The Constitution lacks explicit reference to Christ's lordship, but is nonetheless founded upon biblical presuppositions and infused with biblical principles. The church had a strong presence in American culture at times, even if the founders chose to reject the establishment of a national church. In earlier days, foreign visitors always commented on the religiosity and piety of Americans. The biblical worldview and work ethic have undoubtedly played an unparalleled role in America's rise to the top of world prosperity and productivity.

But looked at from the perspective of *present to past*, a different view emerges. After all, how did we end up as one of the most corrupt, materialistic, and secular nations in history? How did we become a nation which defends the right to murder pre-born children at the rate of one million babies per year? Why do we find our politicians – even ostensibly conservative and Christian politicians – bending over backwards to please homosexuals and others who practice dehumanizing lifestyles? Why does every other American marriage crash upon the rocks of divorce? Why does our culture produce pop trash rather than works that exude truth, beauty, and goodness? Clearly, there was a fly in the ointment from the beginning. We have traced out the problems inherent in the American experiment in some fashion already. The revivals distorted Christianity in this nation almost from the beginning. The Enlightenment injected rationalism and individualism into our national bloodstream as well. Overall, the loss of the presence of a faithful *ekklesia* is really the core of America's problems.

Of course, if the loss of a faithful institutional church has been the problem in America, then we should be able to find our way back. Whether or not American Christians can pull it off remains to be seen – there are a few signs of hope, but for the most part we seem to continue to stumble along in the darkness – but the road we need to take is quite clearly marked out.

Reformation Begins With the Household of God

All of this should make clear that no political solution to our problem is possible. Of course, our nation must be disciplined, and this includes politics. The lordship of Christ is comprehensive and the gospel is a thoroughly christocratic message. So focusing on the

church does not mean retreating into some kind of “evangelical ghetto.” We are not abandon politics, but we do need to put politics in a proper, biblical perspective. Doug Wilson and David Chilton have the right perspective on our present situation:

The need of the hour . . . is theological, not political. The arena is the pulpit and table, not the legislative chamber. The message is Christ crucified and risen for his chosen sinners and now acknowledged Lord of all. This risen and conquering Christ is the Head of the Church. Before we are equipped to proclaim his lordship to the inhabitants of the earth, we must live as though we believed it in the Church.

[The apostle Paul begins his work of cultural reconstruction] with the Church and will move out to bring the rest of the world under Christ’s dominion ‘once your obedience is complete [2 Cor. 10:6]. *The center of Christian reconstruction is the Church.* The River of Life does not flow out from the doors of the chambers of Congresses and Parliaments. It flows from the restored Temple of the Holy Spirit, the Church of Jesus Christ. Our goal is world dominion under Christ’s lordship, a ‘world takeover,’ if you will; but our strategy begins with the reformation and reconstruction of the Church. From that will flow social and political reconstruction, indeed a flowering of Christian civilization (Hag. 1:1-15; 2:6-9, 18-23) . . . The orthodox Christian faith cannot be reduced to personal experiences, academic discussions, or culture-building activity – as important as all these are in varying degrees. The essence of biblical religion is the worship of God. And by *worship* I do not only mean listening to sermons, even though preaching is certainly necessary and important. I mean *organized, congregational prayers, praise, and sacramental celebration* . . . True Christian reconstruction of culture is far from being simply a matter of passing Law X and electing Congressman Y. Christianity is not a political cult. It is the divinely ordained worship of the Most High God.

This is where true reform begins: in the household of God, especially in her worshipping assemblies. The local church, even with all her problems, is the centerpiece of the kingdom of God. She is the nursery of Christian civilization. If American culture is going to be re-Christianized, we must begin there. *Ecclesiastical reformation is the key to cultural transformation.* Without the presence of a strong institutional church, all the political reform in the world will accomplish next to nothing.

The Counter-Cultural Church

This also means we have to rethink our strategy in another respect. With the rise of the so-called “culture wars,” American evangelicals have tended to take an “us-versus-them” approach to culture. We think of the liberals as enemies, and treat them accordingly. *They stole America from us and we want to steal her back.*

It’s disappointing that as Christians have found themselves increasingly marginalized that their response has not been along the lines of the pre-Constantinian church, which also

faced marginalization. Our ignorance of history cripples us. We have not postured ourselves as a counter-culture, an alternative nation within America, with our own story, rites, symbols, holidays, and form of life. Instead, we have tried to play the game of power politics. We have tried to regain influence in a worldly way. Instead of suffering and serving our way to victory, as the early church did, we've tried to lobby and vote our way to victory.

A wonderful opportunity for ministry and evangelism is slipping through our fingers. We've been content to languish along with the rest of the culture. The American church is facing something of an identity crisis. While we know that individually Christians are called to engage the world, rather than retreat, we do not understand the social or cultural functions of the church as an institution. We simply drift wherever the prevailing winds (whether they be Democratic winds or Republican winds) take us. We've lost our sense of direction, and therefore our sense of mission.

Thus, the "culture wars" approach is no longer helpful, if it ever was. As Peter Leithart has suggested, we must learn to fight the battle behind the cultural battle. It is crucial that we recover the biblical doctrine and practice of holy war. New Covenant holy war uses the tactical weapons of preaching, sacramental worship, prayer, service, and church discipline to reshape society. These are more powerful tools than anything in the arsenal of American politics. Voting, lobbying, and boycotting are impotent in comparison to the power Jesus Christ shares with his church.

But more to the point, we must learn to see America not as a battle field, but as a mission field. We must learn to die for the life of the world. We must learn to practice what has been called *cruciformity* – that is, Christ-shaped, sacrificial living. Such a pattern of life does not lend itself to competing in the games politicians play.

Instead of focusing on political reform, we must concentrate our energies on rehabilitating the wounded and weakened body of Christ. The need of the hour is for the church to be the church! In other words, the first item on the church's agenda must be the church. This is not because church and state are "separate," though in an institutional sense, that is true. Nor is it simply because theological/ecclesial questions are more important than political questions. Rather, we must understand, as Leithart has pointed out, theological/ecclesial questions are more important *to politics* than political questions. As Richard John Neuhaus is fond of saying, *the most important political task of the church is to be the church.*

America is a threat, not so much because she is under the rule of secular humanists, but because she is a distraction from the real task at hand, from what should be our chief concern, namely, reforming the institutional *ekklesia*. The rehabilitating of local parish life is our most critical need. To survive the new dark ages that have fallen upon the West, the light of the world, the church (cf. Mt. 5:14), must learn to shine again. This will only happen through the formation of worshipful, virtuous, disciplined, and tightly knit communities of love, joy, and service. It will only happen as Christians stop huddling together with their backs to the world and learn to minister to our culture in

Christ's name. It will only happen as we learn to proclaim in a public way that Jesus Christ is not only Lord of lords and King of kings, but also President of presidents.

Singing Zion's Songs in a Foreign Land

The American church has come to be viewed largely as a voluntary organization, a kind of religious club. Individuals are free to come and go as they please. No real commitment is expected and no real commitment is made. To speak of the church as a covenant community under the governance and oversight of elders who admit and expel people from the body; as a new nation knit together by common rites, stories, songs, and symbols; as a new family bound together by sacred ties of loyalty and love to King Jesus and to one another – all this is simply foreign to us. American Christians have proved to be far more American than Christian.

The church must recover a proper, biblical self-understanding. She must understand what happens – and what is supposed to happen – in a Lord's Day covenant renewal gathering. She must learn what it means to practice vibrant, transforming discipleship, applying the Word of God to every facet of life and culture. She must learn what it means to exist as the "communion of the saints" – a community of kindness, forgiveness, prayerfulness, service, generosity, and love. She must learn what it means to do holistic evangelism involving both word and deed, and to join with her Savior in laying down her life for the sake of the world.

At the same time, we must recover a proper understanding of what it means to live in a Christian society. A Christian culture is one in which the three basic spheres of family, state, and church all work together on the common project of cultivating the kingdom of God on earth. And yet, it is also a society in which the family and state recognize the primacy of the church. The church, rather than the family or state, is understood to be God's central agent in history. As Martin Luther said, if you want to know what God is up to in the world, just look at the church. Here, we might say, is the center of the action.

None of this is demeaning to family or state as God-given, God-ordained, God-blessed, and God-honoring institutions. Obviously, God uses the family for good. As the parents bring seek to nurture their children through teaching, discipline, and prayer, the world becomes a better place. The state too has been a force for good. Sometime rulers have led the way in pointing people to the true God (see, e.g., Jonah 3; Daniel 6; Constantine). Godly magistrates have played a vital role in shaping character, suppressing open wickedness, and maintaining peace and justice. But neither family nor state is self-sufficient. Both institutions feed off the means of grace that God has placed into the hands of the church. Thus the fidelity of the church is the key to a virtuous, just society. Societies are blessed and cursed primarily through the agency of the church.

Getting Our Story Straight

In a Christian civilization – a Christendom situation – the church is central because her story, rites, practices, and symbols shape the rest of society. Take the church's story, as

one example. “Story” has become a very important category in hermeneutics, philosophy, ethics, sociology, anthropology, and so forth. We naturally give our personal identities narrative shape. If someone asks, “Who are you?” we generally tell them our personal narrative, where we came from and where we’re going. The “Who are you question?” is really a way of asking, “What’s your story?” But what is true of personal identities is also true of corporate identities. A shared narrative – sometimes called a metanarrative – gives cohesion and stability to a group. The church is defined as the people who share in the story of Jesus, and in turn, the story of Israel. Paul in 1 Cor. 10 can tell a predominately Gentile church that the exodus narrative belongs to them. They’ve been grafted into the unfolding drama of Israel. Israel’s story is now their story.

But narratives do more than give identity. They also give rise to an ethic, a particular way of being in the world. So, in Romans 6 Paul tells the Roman Christians that in their baptism they were united to Christ. His story of death to sin and resurrection into new life is now their story as well and so they are to live accordingly. If they live in rebellion to God, they are being inconsistent with their deepest identity. The story made theirs in baptism requires that they live a certain way. And so in Romans 6, Paul has said, in essence, “Be who you are! Be true to your story! Follow the script!” If they don’t play the role assigned to them in baptism, their story will have a not so happy ending.

America once took her corporate story from the church. The Puritan settlers, as already mentioned, saw themselves as inheritors of the basic narrative of Christendom. Within medieval Christendom, that glorious ecclesiocentric era of the so-called “Middle Ages” and early Reformational period, the church’s story was the culture’s story. Western civilization as a whole took her cues, however imperfectly, from the biblical narrative. The story of Scripture, of redemptive history, of the kingdom of God, was fundamental. The first colonists came not simply to escape religious persecution or discover great wealth; they came to write the next chapter in the unfolding story of the kingdom of God on earth. They interpreted their mission in terms of the outworking of the gospel story. Their sense of identity and their way of life arose from this basic narrative. Their desire to build a godly social order founded on biblical principles, to evangelize the natives, and so forth, all only make sense in this light.

We’ve already traced out how the Christian story was exchanged for another the story – the story of the modern nation-state, the story of liberal democracy, the story of autonomous individualism – over the last few centuries. While the American drama has taken a turn for the worse, this is not necessarily a problem; Scripture, I think, leads us to expect the kingdom will ebb and flow in history. There are seasons of growth and fruitfulness, just as there are winters of barrenness and stagnation. The mustard seed grows into the greatest of all trees slowly, not in a single season. And even if America is apostate, along with the rest of the West, she can still be brought back to repentance in due time. America may have been lost, for the most part, but she can be regained once again someday. Christians need not panic as though the kingdom failed when America went secular.

What *is* problematic is that American Christians can't seem to get their own story straight. They can't seem to disentangle the America-as-modern-nation-state story from the church's biblically formed story. This is why we have so much worldliness – or really, *Americanness* – in our churches. We take our cue from the surrounding culture rather than Scripture. Thus, from one angle, our most pressing need is to recover the centrality of the gospel itself – particularly as it is preached from pulpits, rehearsed in the liturgy, enacted in the sacraments, and embodied in various forms of ministry and service. In other words, the church, as a gospel formed community, must learn once again to be the body of Christ in and for the world.

Such an undertaking is our only hope of restoring and recreating Christendom, a culture in which church, state, and family all prosper in their respective places.