

# What Do The Prophets Have To Say To Us As We Enter Century III?

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Dr. Paul Peters, who taught Old Testament at our Seminary until 1966, used to admonish his students, "Let the prophet speak!" He was telling us, I think, not to let our own preconceived notions get into the way of the prophetic Word, and to put ourselves into the situation of the first hearers of what the prophet said. "Listen to what the LORD says," is the appeal of Jeremiah (22:29).

But the prophets of Israel, God's servants from Moses to Malachi, spoke and wrote within history. They were blood descendants of Abraham, not Americans; they spoke Hebrew, not English; they delivered their messages in a theocracy, a nation that called the LORD its king, not in a constitutional republic. In time, the last of the Jewish prophets was separated from the foundation of our republic by as many years as you and I are separated from the birth of Jesus. What could they have known of the United States of America or of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod? And so what can the prophets have to say to us in our church as our nation enters the third century of its history?

That word "evangelical" in our church's name describes one bond between the prophets and us, uniting us across the centuries. We call ourselves an "evangelical" Lutheran synod because we exist by the power of the Holy Spirit through the evangel, the good news, and it is our mission to proclaim the good news. The Old Testament prophets also knew and believed and preached the same gospel. The Spirit could well have been speaking to them when He said:

You who bring good tidings to Zion,  
go up on a high mountain.  
You who bring good tidings to Jerusalem  
lift up your voice with a shout  
Lift it up, do not be afraid;  
say to the cities of Judah,  
"Here is your God!"  
See, the Sovereign LORD comes with power,  
and his arm rules for him.  
See, his reward is with him,  
and his recompense accompanies him.  
He tends his flock like a shepherd:  
He gathers the lambs in his arms  
and carries them close to his heart;  
he gently leads those that have young. (Isa 40:9-11)

The prophets were sent to preach repentance and to point to Christ. As preachers of repentance, they spoke to their people about their sins in their time; as pointers to Christ they preached forgiveness for their people through faith in the promise which Israel's God would surely keep.

The New Testament makes it clear that the written words of the prophets are God's Word for all time. "Men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Pe 1:21), Peter says. Paul more than a millennium after Moses calls the God-breathed writings of the prophets still "useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" in his time, "so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Ti 3:16-17). In fact, Christians cannot afford to disregard the history of God's Old Testament people and the prophets' interpretation of Israel's history, because "these things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come" (1 Co 10:11).

If we are to hear the prophets speak and to let them teach, rebuke, correct, train, equip, and warn us, we must first of all consider the historical sense of what they said. Not only must we read and hear their words, but we must try to appreciate as well as we can their social circumstances, the culture that surrounded them, and their historical situation. When your pastor preaches a sermon on Isaiah 53, for example, he considers the difference in time between himself and the prophet. The preacher today does not simply repeat the words of Isaiah that the Servant of the LORD is coming to carry his people's sins. Your pastor tells you the good news that Jesus of Nazareth completed the Father's work when he suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried for your sins. He is proclaiming the prophetic word to you now, in your time. Or consider how the same teaching may be differently applied because of a change in the situation or circumstances of one man. My father taught me to honor and obey him when I was a child. Now my father is dead and I am a father. I now apply my father's teaching by expecting honor and obedience from my children. Because of a change in manners and customs, my children will probably show honor and obedience in a way more relaxed than my way when I was a child. Yet I continue today to apply my father's teaching. So in applying the prophets' teaching: their words are truth; they continue to apply to us; but we must consider changed situations.

For the purposes of this paper the term prophets will be narrowed down to the *writing prophets*. We shall not hear much of the prophets like Nathan or Elijah, who preached but did not write their messages. The

books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings are called *former prophets* by the Jews, but they will not be considered here. We shall concentrate on some passages from the *latter prophets*: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the twelve minor prophets, plus the book of Daniel. Many of you will think of passages that I have omitted; You may want to add some of them during the discussion.

### **I. A COMPARISON BETWEEN THE PROPHETS' SITUATION AND OURS**

When the prophets preached and wrote, Israel had been in the land of Canaan for over five hundred years. The Israelite nation, born in the Exodus from Egypt, could have celebrated three times two hundred years of national history before the time of Amos or Isaiah. There was a nation specially created and called by the LORD. It was the LORD who called Moses to lead his people out of Egypt. In the wilderness at Mt. Sinai the LORD himself gave the people the conditions of their covenant with him, the collection of laws which governed their life together as his people. Upon the death of Moses, the LORD designated Joshua to lead Israel into the land of Canaan and to portion it out to the tribes. Those were the days of the nation's faithful obedience to the conditions of the Sinai covenant: "The people served the LORD as long as Joshua lived and as long as the elders lived that outlived Joshua and had seen all the great deeds the LORD did for Israel" (Jdg 2:7). The LORD was their Ruler, and they were His people.

But "another generation grew up after them who didn't know the LORD or what he had done for Israel. Then Israel did what displeased the LORD and served the Baals. They left the LORD, the God of their fathers, who brought them out of Egypt, and followed other gods, the gods of the people around them, and worshiped them and so made the LORD angry. They left the LORD and served Baal and Astarte" (Jdg 2:10-13). Yet even during that disorganized period, when there was no king in Israel and "everybody did what he thought was right" (Jdg 17:6), the LORD still periodically gave the people military and civil leaders, the Judges. Israel was a theocracy, a nation governed by God. The LORD ruled his people through the laws he gave and through the leaders he sent.

The last of the Judges was Samuel. When he was old, he appointed his sons to be judges, but they took bribes and were unjust. At that time the elders of the people came to Samuel and requested, "Now appoint a king for us to rule over us; all the other nations have one" (1 Sa 8:5). When Samuel was reluctant to do what they asked, the LORD told him to obey the people. "They haven't rejected you but Me from being their King," the LORD said (1 Sa 8:7). Even after Samuel had warned them of what demands a king would make—their sons to fight for him, their daughters to work in the palace, their slaves, their animals, their fruit, grain, wine, even their liberty itself—the people would not listen. "We must have a king over us," they said. "Then we'll be like all the other nations. Our king will rule over us. He'll lead us and fight our battles (1 Sa 8:19-20). Now Israel became a kingdom, but in a more limited sense than before it was a theocratic kingdom still: the LORD appointed and rejected King Saul and then set David, Solomon, and their descendants on the throne.

Put yourself into the place of a citizen of Jerusalem in the days of Solomon about 950 B.C. The head of your government is the king, who combines in himself the functions of the American president and Supreme Court. The king governs through the administrative officers whom he appoints (2 Ch 8:10), but the basic law of the land is still found in the civil regulations of the Law of Moses, given on Mt. Sinai. The center of your worship life is the Temple on Mt. Zion, built by King Solomon and accepted by the LORD as the place of his presence among His people. The Temple worship, adorned with the Psalms of David, is governed by the ceremonial provisions of the Torah of Moses. You are a citizen of the Israelite nation; you are a worshiper of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel. The boundaries of God's people his visible assembly or church, seem to be the boundaries of the Israelite nation.

Transferring that situation into our time, imagine a hymnal with most of the hymns written by presidents of the United States, as King David wrote the Psalms. Imagine that all of you men would be expected to travel to Washington, D.C., to celebrate Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost, as the Israelites went to Jerusalem for their pilgrimage feasts. Imagine that "the Christian church" and "the American nation" were two designations for the same body of people. We might diagram the situation of the Israelites with a red circle and a blue circle, the red standing for the Israelite church and the blue for the Israelite nation. For practical purposes one circle would have to be placed right over the other. The individual Israelite finds himself in both the red and the blue and under normal circumstances it probably looks purple to him.

How difficult it was for an Israelite to separate his religious confession from his national citizenship is clear from what happened when the kingdom was divided. After the death of King Solomon, Jereboam led a revolt of the ten northern tribes against Solomon's son Rehoboam, who continued to rule the tribes of Judah and Benjamin from Jerusalem. Concerning the citizens of his northern kingdom Jereboam thought to himself, "If these people go up and sacrifice in the LORD's temple in Jerusalem, their hearts will turn back to their master, Rehoboam king of Judah" (1 Ki 12:27). Therefore he set up golden calves at Bethel and at Dan and said, "You have been going up to Jerusalem long enough. Here are your gods, Israel, who took you out of Egypt" (1 Ki 12:28). A person who wanted to worship according to the Law in Jerusalem would have been considered a traitor to King Jereboam. It was then that believers in the northern kingdom had to distinguish between national and religious loyalties. Many of them chose to obey God rather than Jereboam. "The priests gave up their land and their property and left for Judah and Jerusalem because Jereboam and his descendants barred them from serving the LORD as priests, and he appointed his own priests for the high places, for the demons, and for the calves he made. Those who in all the tribes of Israel devoted themselves to searching for the LORD, the God of Israel, followed them to Jerusalem to sacrifice to the LORD, the God of their fathers" (2 Ch 11:14-16).

Using the same symbols we employed above, we might also try to diagram our situation today. We must consider first that the extent of the visible Christian church today does not correspond with the boundaries of any one nation, and then also that our synod is one small church body among the visible Christian churches. Let a red circle stand for the visible Christian church today; let the blue circle stand for the United States. The red circle must be larger than the blue and only partly overlap it, to show that the visible church extends far beyond the boundaries of our country and that only some Americans confess themselves to be Christians. In the overlapping part would be a small white circle for the membership of the Wisconsin Synod, except that the white circle would also have to extend a little bit beyond the blue nation circle, since a small proportion of our church's membership is made up of citizens of other lands. Remember that there would have to be a large space left in the overlapping part of the church and nation circles for the symbols of other synods and denominations. The Southern Baptist circle, for one example, would have to be some thirty times the size of ours.

Perhaps it begins to be plain now why we must consider the situation so carefully before applying the writings of the prophets to ourselves as we celebrate our nation's bicentennial. You are a Christian, a Lutheran, a member of a congregation in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. You are also a citizen of the State of Minnesota and of the United States of America. You are able to draw quite a clear line between those two stations that you occupy. As a Christian you consider yourself one with all the members of your church and of others which teach as you do, and you recognize also that the Holy Spirit has joined you by faith invisibly to Christ and to all Christians of all times everywhere, whatever their nationality may be. As an American you consider yourself to be joined in brotherhood and union with all the citizens of this land, whatever their religious beliefs may be. As an American you respect the laws of this land, formulated by Congress and your state's legislature, interpreted by state and federal courts, administered by the president of the United States and the governor of the State of Minnesota. Those laws, thanks to the separation of church and state, say nothing of your obligation to God, or even that you should have a god. As a Christian you accept the authority of the Bible, which commands obedience to government generally as "established by God" (Ro 13:1) but does not mention the American, Russian, or Zambian government specifically. Your being a member of our church does not imply any allegiance to a particular government, and your being an American does not imply any particular religious confession. The situation was quite different in the prophets' time.

Because it involves the mission of the Christian Church in the world, I must also mention one other difference between the prophets and those who must speak for God today. The prophets were sometimes called to be God's messengers to kings, even to the kings of foreign nations. The LORD told Jeremiah at his call, "See, today I've appointed you to be over the nations and kingdoms" (Jer 1:10). Later the LORD sent Jeremiah not only to King Zedekiah of Judah but also to the kings of Edom, Moab, Ammon, Tyre, and Sidon, with the warning, "If any nation or kingdom will not serve Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, or put its neck under the yoke of the king of Babylon, I will punish that nation by sword, famine, and plague, says the LORD, till I have put an end to them by his hand.... But if any nation will put its neck under the yoke of the king of Babylon and serve him, I will leave them in their own country, says the LORD, and they will cultivate it and live in it" (Jer 27:8,11). Never is the Christian Church commissioned to take such a message to any government on earth today.

If, then, we are to apply the words of the prophets to ourselves today, we must consider the changed situation of the church in our land in our time. We cannot simply take a word of Isaiah or Amos or Micah by which they said what was expected of Israelite government or of Israelite society and apply the word to our government and our American society. Israel was a people that God created and called to be his own; it was his people, his visible church of the Old Covenant. This American people, as a nation, makes no religious confession, or at most, expresses a confused diversity of religious beliefs. That was a people to whom God had revealed himself: "I the LORD am your God, who brought you out of Egypt, where you were slaves" (Exodus 20:2). This American people has little understanding of the true God. To say to our society, "Be holy, as God is holy" or "Love one another, as Christ has loved you" can mean little to people who do not know the holy and loving LORD. And to expect that this people will visibly manifest God's rule on earth is totally unrealistic. Even Israel fell far short of that; the prophets expected to see God's rule manifested visibly only in the Messianic age.

The Social Gospel movement in the United States based much of its theology on its misunderstanding of the Old Testament prophets. In 1907 Walter Rauschenbusch, a famous preacher of the Social Gospel, published *Christianity and the Social Crisis*. In the first three chapters he outlined the historical roots of Christianity in the prophets, the social aims of Jesus, and the social impetus of primitive Christianity. Concerning the prophets he said, "The fundamental conviction of the prophets, which distinguished them from the ordinary religious life of their day, was the conviction that God demands righteousness and demands nothing but righteousness (p. 4) .... It is important to note, further, that the morality which the prophets had in mind in their strenuous insistence on righteousness was not merely the private morality of the home, but the public morality on which national life is founded (p.8).... They backed their preaching by active participation in public action and discussion (p.11)." Rauschenbusch sums up: "The essential purpose of Christianity was to transform human society into the kingdom of God by regenerating all human relations and reconstituting them in accordance with the will of God" (xiii). What the prophets said to the people of God is interpreted as God's blueprint for the ideal society that He will establish in the United States.

This kind of thinking still goes on. I quote the Rev. Jose Bonino, a president of the World Council of Churches and a spokesman for what is called “liberation theology.” In “liberation theology,” Bonino says, “Christians have recovered the prophetic tradition,” because the Bible always relates God’s actions to historical conditions and judges political systems on their treatment of the lowest members of society. “We have to explode this myth of the separation of religion and politics,” he says. In keeping with such “liberation theology” Christians have become involved in sociopolitical emancipation movements, and the World Council of Churches assigned funds for education and health programs of violent revolutionary liberation movements in Angola and Mozambique (*Milwaukee Journal*, Saturday, June 5, 1976, p. 4).

I suppose that on the other end of the political spectrum some equally misguided conservatives would also consider themselves faithful to the prophetic tradition when they launch “a plan to save America by making it a ‘Christian republic’ and using evangelical Christian organizations to elect right wingers to Congress. The plan involves ‘turning the nation back to God’ with political education spearheaded by evangelical organizations and personalities that would work to abolish minimum wage and compulsory education laws, institute right to work laws, return the nation to the gold standard, reduce the federal government’s role in social services and increase military spending.... Spearheading the movement are Rep. John Conlan (R-Ariz.), and Bill Bright, head of Campus Crusade for Christ” (*Milwaukee Journal*, Saturday, May 29, 1976, p. 4).

## **II. WHAT DO THE PROPHETS HAVE TO SAY TO US AS CITIZENS OF OUR NATION?**

### **1. Jehovah is the Lord of the nations, the Ruler of all history.**

It was a typical ancient belief that gods, like human rulers, had territories and jurisdictions. When Ahab defeated the Aramaeans on hilly ground, the officers of the Aramaean king told him, “Their god is a god of the hills, and so they were stronger than we are. But if we fight them on level ground, we will certainly be stronger than they are” (I Ki 20:23). Contrary to this sort of superstition, the prophets proclaim God as the Creator of the world, still constantly active in the history of all nations, leading their migrations, assigning them their territories, determining their poverty or wealth, raising up and deposing their rulers as He will.

Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand,  
or with the breadth of his hand marked off the heavens?  
Who has held the dust of the earth in a basket,  
or weighed the mountains on the scales and the hills in a balance?....  
Surely the nations are like a drop in the bucket;  
they are regarded as dust on the scales;  
he weighs the islands as though they were fine dust....  
Before him all the nations are as nothing;  
they are regarded by him as worthless and less than nothing.  
To whom then will you compare God?  
What image will you compare him to?  
He sits enthroned above the circle of the earth,  
and her people are like grasshoppers.  
He stretches out the heavens like a canopy,  
and spreads them out like a tent to live in.  
He brings princes to naught,  
and reduces the rulers of this world to nothing.  
No sooner are they planted,  
no sooner are they sown,  
no sooner do they take root in the ground,  
than he blows on them and they wither,  
and a whirlwind sweeps them away like chaff. (Isaiah 40:12-24)

We therefore recognize that the pious phrase added to the pledge of allegiance expresses the truth: this nation is “under God.” The human details of its history should not make us forget the LORD, who shapes every aspect of history with His hand. That those English settlers should have landed at Jamestown and at Plymouth; that they should have brought with them a Protestant Christian faith; that their colonies survived and eventually prospered, while New Spain and New France withered away; that they should have come at a time when the countries of the old world would become embroiled in religious wars which would sicken the hearts of Europeans; that the philosophy which had developed at the time of our country’s founding, though hardly Christian, should have favored freedom of conscience: all of this was in the hand of the world’s Creator and Preserver, the Lord of history.

To see his hand behind the hands of men in current happenings, as opposed to the more distant events of history, is more difficult. But we know that the outcomes of the Civil War and the two World Wars and the Korean War and the Vietnam War, no less than the result of the Revolutionary War, were as he decided. To say this does not deny the tangle of selfish motivations and the welter of sinful actions which are components in any war. Not the divine Ruler but the human warriors are accountable for those. It was God’s will to use the King of Assyria as “the rod of his anger” against rebellious Judah, but when he had finished his work against Jerusalem the LORD would say, “I will punish the king of Assyria for the willful pride of his heart and the haughty look in his eyes: (Isa 10: 5-19). The westward expansion of America, the abolition of slavery, the growth of the

welfare state, the enforced integration of the races in the public schools: sin entered into every movement and event, but none of them would have happened without the permission of God. Though each of us, selfishly or selflessly motivated as God alone knows, must cast his vote, it is ultimately the LORD who decides whether Jimmy Carter or Ronald Reagan or Gerald Ford or someone else will be the next president of the United States. Unless it can be shown that legislation or the administration of the country or the courts' interpretation of the laws is demonic—that it comes from Satan and puts people under Satan's power—we are bound to recognize in all of these aspects of government the hand of the same almighty LORD who set the house of David on Judah's throne, sent Nebuchadnezzar to level Jerusalem, and raised up Cyrus to bring the Judaeans back home.

## **2. The LORD who establishes governments judges them by His Law.**

The prophet Amos preached against the sins of the Northern Kingdom about the middle of the Eighth Century B.C. But before condemning the rebellion of Judah and Israel against the LORD, he first issued God's judgments upon Syria, Philistia, Tyre, Ammon, and Moab. He did not condemn those nations only for their sins against his People; he judged them according to the natural law, written into their hearts, also for their sins against each other. Moab, for example, was condemned "because they burned the bones of the king of Edom to make lime" (2:1). Surely God's people Israel had a deeper responsibility. The LORD told Israel:

Of all the people on earth I have chosen only you,  
and so I will punish you for all your wrongs. (Am 3:2)

Yet not only the people of Israel but all people and all governments are measured according to the plumbline of God's law.

It follows that many of the requirements stated by the prophets for the kings of Judah and Israel apply to all human governments. This can be shown by comparing the requirements that the prophets laid down for the Israelite and Judaeans with the ideals expressed in ancient heathen law codes. Jeremiah told Jehoiakim of Judah: "Do what is right and just, rescue anyone who is robbed from the oppressor's hands. Don't oppress or treat violently a stranger, orphan, or widow. Don't pour out innocent blood in this place" (Jer 22:3). Now listen to Hammurabi, king of Babylon, describe himself as the ideal king at the end of his law code (c. 1700 B.C.):

I have governed them in peace;  
I have sheltered them in my strength.  
In order that the strong might not oppress the weak,  
that justice might be dealt the orphan (and) the widow  
in Babylon . . .  
I wrote my precious words on my stela . . .  
I set (it) up in order to administer the law of the land,  
to prescribe the ordinances of the land,  
to give justice to the oppressed.

(J.B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts* ((Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1950)), p. 178)

The concern for the rights of the widow and orphan is expressed in both Israel and Babylon because it is an acid test of justice in any nation when those are defended who cannot defend themselves.

Government officials have a conscience, which they may or may not acknowledge as a witness to the law of God written into their hearts (Ro 2:14-16). We Christians have a conscience guided not only by the natural law but also by God's revealed standard of right and wrong. If government is responsible to God for how it governs, it follows that in a republic we are responsible, too, to the extent that we elect and exercise some control over our governors. To the right of each American citizen to participate in his own government is joined the responsibility for establishing just laws, which prevent oppression, violence, and bloodshed and protect those who cannot protect themselves.

Though most of us are not public officials, especially we Christians in a democracy need the sort of common sense advice expressed by a former Milwaukee County Board member (*Milwaukee Journal*, Sunday, April 11, 1976, Page 3, Part 5): "1. Encourage others to serve: Many individuals would be interested and willing to serve in public office if their peers recommended and encouraged them.... 2. Support your elected representatives: Frequently citizens have never taken the time to evaluate the quality of work performance of their elected officials .... Particularly where a legislator is taking a somewhat unpopular but 'high road' course of action with respect to a particular legislative problem, he or she will need some indication of support .... 3. Familiarize yourself with issues and develop opinions: For a variety of reasons, including the growing complexity of our society, most citizens are unfamiliar with the issues and alternatives facing legislators .... 4. Be active in effective groups: A citizen standing alone (absent unique circumstances) has minimal effect upon the overall legislative process .... 5. Fulfill your responsibility to vote: Despite the fact that nearly everyone is concerned about preserving his rights in government, a minority of people regularly fulfill their responsibility by voting in all elections."

## **3. The LORD judges a government especially by its attitude toward His people.**

Quite a number of times the prophets speak to or about the heathen nations around Judah and Israel. Because of the LORD's faithful love for His covenant people, He weighs other nations according to their attitude toward Israel and Judah. In 722 B.C. He spoke a final judgment upon the kingdom of Israel by letting the Assyrians overrun the northern kingdom, take Samaria, its capital, and deport its citizens to Mesopotamia. In 587/6 B.C. the southern kingdom suffered the same fate at the hands of King Nebuchadnezzar; the king and

leading citizens of Judah were exiled to Babylon. In connection with the destruction of Jerusalem the prophet Obadiah spoke his one chapter prophesy against the Edomites, who stood by or even joined the Babylonians when they sacked Jerusalem.

Because you did violence to your brother Jacob,  
shame will overwhelm you,  
and you will be cut off forever.

That day you stood by  
when strangers carried off his goods;  
foreigners came into his gates  
and cast lots over Jerusalem  
and you were just like one of them.

You shouldn't gloat when your brother has his day of calamity.

You shouldn't be delighted when the people of Judah are ruined.

You shouldn't talk so big when he's in trouble.

You shouldn't come into the gate of My people on the day of their disaster.

You shouldn't look so pleased at his misery on the day of his-disaster.

You shouldn't lay your hand on his goods on the day of his disaster.

You shouldn't stand at the crossroad to kill those who escape.

You shouldn't hand over anyone who gets away on the day of-trouble.

For the day of the LORD is near for all the nations.

You will be treated just as you behaved.

What you did will come back on you. (Ob 10-15)

Edom is cursed because of its cruel attitude toward the people of God.

On the other hand, the Persian king Cyrus, who in 539 B.C. issued the decree which returned the remnant of Judeans from exile to their homeland, is called the LORD's anointed:

For the sake of Jacob my servant,  
of Israel my chosen,

I call you by name

And bestow on you a title of honor,  
though you do not acknowledge me. (Isa 45:4)

It is one of the great ironies of our country's early history that out of a period of religious decline, when the dominant spirit among America's leaders was anything but Christian in a Biblical sense, came one of the great opportunities for the Christian churches to preach the Gospel freely throughout a whole nation. "The revolutionary era was a period of decline for American Christianity as a whole. The churches reached a lower ebb of vitality during the two decades after the end of hostilities than at any other time in the country's religious history." The Revolutionary War "left the churches disorganized and their members preoccupied by burning questions of a military or political nature .... By the end of the period, church membership had dropped both relatively and absolutely, so that not more than one person in twenty or possibly one in ten seems to have been affiliated; in many churches membership itself became increasingly nominal" (S. E. Ahlstrom) *A Religious History of the American People* ((New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1972)) p. 365). An article in the June 27, 1976 *Northwestern Lutheran* describes "The Religion of the Founding Fathers." Thomas Jefferson "brought out *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*.... The selected passages are woven together to form a topical narrative that is supposed to reproduce what Jesus actually did and taught. All accounts of miracles, as well as the resurrection chapters, are left out, and the picture of Jesus remaining is that of a virtuous man and wise teacher" (pp. 200-201).

Yet from that time and by the influence of men like Jefferson the United States was blessed with religious liberty. Article Six of our Constitution, ratified in 1787, prohibited religious tests "as a qualification for any office or public trust under the United States," and the First Amendment, ratified in 1791, stated that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." While the government of the United States has not always granted equal justice to all its citizens and has not always been free of venal and power-hungry men, it has not persecuted the Gospel or the Christian churches. Our freedom to hear and preach the Gospel should stand at the head of all the blessings we count up in this bicentennial year. It is in keeping with the prophets' witness to say that God has blessed this nation because its government has not persecuted the Christian churches or interfered with their Christian mission.

#### **Some Questions for Discussion**

1. If you were a Christian in-the city of Rome, where a Communist government took power last week, what would be your attitude and obligation to your municipal government?
2. As a Christian citizen, what action can you take regarding the legislation adopted or under consideration in many states legalizing all sexual behavior among consenting adults?
3. What responsibility do you have for the decision of the Supreme Court liberalizing abortion laws?
4. In the unlikely event that the government of the United States would grant state support to the WELS and prohibit the exercise of other religions, what would be your response? Why?
5. Why has it been uncommon for pastors of our synod to express publicly their opinions on legislative and political matters?

### III. WHAT DO THE PROPHETS HAVE TO SAY TO US AS CHRISTIANS IN AMERICA?

#### 1. Christians will accept religious freedom as an opportunity to proclaim the Gospel.

The most powerful enemy of the northern kingdom of Israel was the Assyrian Empire. About 840 B.C. the Israelite king Jehu paid symbolic tribute to the Assyrian Shalmaneser III. A little more than a century later Tiglath Pileser picked off the northern provinces of the kingdom of Israel (2 Ki 15:29f.). One of the great cities of Assyria, destined later to become its capital, was Nineveh. Perhaps, then, it is not hard for us to understand the action of the prophet Jonah when the LORD called him, "Get up and go to the great city of Nineveh and announce to her that I see how wicked they are" (1:2). Why should an Israelite prophet call a heathen Assyrian city to repentance and faith in a merciful LORD? Jonah fled in the opposite direction, to Tarshish, away from Nineveh and, as his book says, away from the LORD. You know how the LORD provided transportation to bring his prophet back. When the city repented in response to the LORD's Word, he did not carry out his threat to destroy it. Jonah complained angrily, "Now, LORD, isn't this what I said when I was still in my own country. So I went and fled to Tarshish. I knew you are gracious, merciful, patient, and very kind, and you regret to bring on disaster" (4:2-3). Then the prophet sulked in the shade of a little booth that he had built.

"The LORD God had a plant grow up over Jonah to serve as a shade over his head to keep him from suffering, and Jonah delighted very much in the plant. But when the next day dawned, God had a worm come and attack the plant so that it withered. When the sun rose, God had a hot east wind blow. The sun struck Jonah's head so that he fainted and asked for death, saying, 'It's better for me to die than live.' 'Is it right for you to get so angry about the plant?' God asked Jonah. 'It is right for me to be angry enough to die,' he answered. 'You feel sorry for the plant you didn't work for or raise,' the LORD said, 'because it grew in a night and died in a night. Shouldn't I feel sorry for this great city of Nineveh in which there are more than 120,000 persons who can't tell their right hand from their left, and many animals?'" (4:6-11).

Jonah did not think that the Ninevites deserved to be saved. Like the older brother of the prodigal son, he did not want sinners to receive mercy. He had forgotten that his own life and salvation depended on the grace, mercy, patience, and kindness of the LORD. To what extent do his thoughts mirror ours as we look around ourselves at our immoral, materialistic, pleasure-seeking, godless fellow Americans? The call we have received is no less plain and much more inclusive than Jonah's call: "Preach the good news to all creation" (Mk 16:15). According to the pattern set by the LORD, such preaching begins in our own land, where we are (Ac 1:8). Does the blessing of a separate parochial and synodical school system or the confessional necessity of resisting the ecumenical movement contribute toward the maintenance of a pious ghetto? By grace we are saved, and grace is a gift for undeserving American Christians to give to undeserving American unbelievers. If we think that our history has given us some special standing with the LORD; if we have forgotten that "from everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded" (Lk 12:48): then we will need to apply to ourselves the hard words spoken by Amos to an ungrateful Israel:

"Aren't you Israelites like the people of Ethiopia to Me?"  
asks the LORD.

"Didn't I bring Israel up out of Egypt,  
the Philistines from Crete, and the Syrians from Kir?" (Am 9:7)

#### 2. Christians must not adopt the American heresy that true religion is whatever anyone believes it is.

When the Hebrews came into the land of Canaan, they found a highly developed religious life. Canaanite religion, of a type widespread in the ancient world, emphasized especially two aspects of nature. The Canaanites saw the activity of their gods in the constantly repeating cycle of life and death that was observed in the wet and dry seasons of the year and also in the reproductive force among plants, animals, and man. The most powerful Canaanite god was Baal, whose name means simply master or lord. Baal was pictured riding the storm clouds, with a lightning bolt in his hand; he impregnated the fields with the early and late rains and so gave the gifts of grain and fruit and wine to his worshipers. Baal and his sister, or consort, Astarte were served not only with sacrifices but also by their worshipers' participation at their shrines in their activity, which was primarily sexual. This explains the presence of male and female prostitutes at the Canaanite shrines, the fleshly appeal of the Canaanite worship, and also the imagery the prophets chose to picture the unfaithfulness of God's people.

The prophet Hosea was directed by God to marry a prostitute as a symbolic action testifying against the spiritual adultery of Israel. His daughter was named "Unloved" and his son "Not-My-People" as a testimony against Israel for serving Baal.

She is not my wife  
and I am not her husband, (the LORD said.)  
She should get rid of the sexual lust on her face  
and the adultery between her breasts,  
or I will strip her naked  
and make her bare as when she was born  
And I will not love her children,  
because they are born in prostitution.  
Their mother lived as a prostitute;  
she who conceived them did shameful things,

saying, I'll go after my lovers  
who gave me my food and water,  
my wool and flax,  
my olive oil and wine." (Hosea 1:2-5)

Without a doubt the Canaanites attributed their prosperity to a god. The prophets do not attack the sincerity of their worship. But from the beginning of Israel's life in Canaan, the LORD warned His people that he alone is God, his people's faithful husband, and that the worship of Baal was spiritual adultery.

Although one might sometimes wonder whether the American god is some sort of fertility deity or sex symbol, that is not the main point of what I am saying here. The point is that the LORD required the whole allegiance of his people; their allegiance to him required the rejection of all false religion. There was no middle way, as if Baal could be god for his believers and the Lord God for his. In a land that allows freedom of conscience, there is a special temptation for the worshipers of the true God to forget that there is no other. Is it not typically American to say, "your minister, priest, or rabbi will teach you to know God better"? Is it not typically in America that you will see advertising signs along the highway urging you to "attend the church or synagogue of your choice"? There is the feeling that to be American you ought to be religious, in the spirit of President Eisenhower, who said in 1954, "Our government makes no sense unless it is founded on a deeply felt religious faith—and I don't care what it is" (Ahlstrom, op. cit., p. 954). Twenty years ago the motto that had stood on our coins since 1865 became the official motto of our country: "In God we trust." Christians in America had better be prepared to say which God deserves the trust of all men. Religious toleration must not become religious relativism.

### **3. The religious life of Christians includes their life in the world.**

In the last days of the kingdom of Judah the prophet Jeremiah was called to prophesy the captivity of God's people. But to the citizens of Jerusalem in 600 B.C. it was inconceivable that their city and the temple, the symbol of the LORD's presence among them, should be captured and destroyed by the heathen. A century before, when the Assyrian Sennacharib had threatened to storm Jerusalem, had not the LORD said through Isaiah,

I will defend this city and save it, for my sake and for the sake of David my servant!  
(Isa 37:35)

And so a century later, when the prophet Jeremiah threatened that the city would be destroyed because of its idolatry and sin, the people must have answered, "Impossible! The LORD's temple is among us. We are safe!" That sounded like faith, but it was not. At the gate of the temple Jeremiah preached a sermon which began like this:

"All you men of Judah who go into these gates to worship the LORD, hear what the LORD says. The LORD of armies, the God of Israel, says: Live right and do good, and I will live with you in this place. Don't trust those who deceive you by saying, 'This is the LORD's temple, the LORD's temple, the LORD's temple!' No, if you will really live right and do good, if you will treat one another right, if you will not oppress strangers, orphans, or widows, or kill innocent people in this place, or ruin yourselves by running after other gods, then I will live with you in this place, in the land I long ago gave your fathers to be theirs forever. But now you trust in lies that can't help you. What! Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear to lies, sacrifice to idols, and run after other gods you don't know, and then come and stand before Me in this house that bears My name and say, 'We are rescued!' only to go on doing all these abominable things? Do you think this house that bears my name is a den of robbers?" (Jer 7:2-11). The prophet went on to tell the Jews that their temple would be leveled and that they would be driven off into exile.

The prophets had no use for a religious life that confined itself to the courts of the temple. Their words lashed out at the rich women of Samaria at their drinking parties, paid for by oppressing the poor and crushing the needy (Am 4:1-3); at profit hungry businessmen who could hardly wait for the Sabbath to be over to return to their crooked scales and selling as grain what they swept up from the floor (Amos 8:4-6); and at even a king who would build a luxurious palace by making people work for him for nothing (Jeremiah 22:13).

If Christians keep their religious life within the four walls of their churches; if they live in their secular callings as if their work had nothing to do with their calling to be the people of God; if they think that Sunday church attendance is a charm against the judgments of a holy God; then they are making God's house a hiding place for thieves. And no sacrifices for the multiplication of church buildings, expansion of school systems, and broadening of mission fields can please the LORD if they are not accompanied by penitent hearts which delight in justice and mercy for men.

What should I bring when I meet the LORD  
and bow to God on high?  
Should I come to Him with burnt offerings,  
with calves a year old?  
Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams,  
with ten thousand streams of olive oil?  
Should I give my firstborn for my wrong,  
the child of my body for my sin?

You were told, man, what is good



and what the LORD wants from you:  
only do what is right,  
love mercy,  
and live humbly with your God. (Micah 6:6-8)

#### **4. The ultimate security of God's people is not in any earthly government but in His everlasting kingdom.**

Not only when they asked for a king but many times in their later history God's people were tempted to put their trust in men rather than in God. Especially when Judah had become a pebble between the Egyptian and Assyrian millstones, its kings and people looked for security in an alliance with one against the other. Isaiah had to tell them,

Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help,  
who rely on horses,  
who trust in the multitude of their chariots  
and in the great strength of their horsemen,  
but do not look to the Holy One of Israel,  
or seek help from the LORD ....  
The Egyptians are men and not God;  
their horses are flesh and not spirit.  
When the LORD stretches out his hand,  
he who helps will stumble,  
he who is helped will fall;  
both will perish together. (Isa 31:1.3)

The power of Egypt shrank away before Assyria and Babylon. Israel fell to Assyria in 722 B.C., but by 612 B.C. the Assyrian Empire had collapsed before the Babylonians. Jerusalem fell to Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon in 587/6 B.C., but the Babylonian power had to yield to Cyrus, King of Persia, in 539 B.C. The Persians' power lasted until their defeat by Alexander the Great about two centuries later. Alexander's divided empire was absorbed by the Romans before the time of Christ. And where is the Roman Empire today? The Caesars and their legions have joined Pharaoh and his horsemen in the grave (Eze 32).

The book of Daniel, while not called a prophetic book by the Jews, contains a number of visions of world history. Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon dreamed of a statue with a gold head, silver chest and arms bronze lower body, iron legs, and feet of iron mixed with clay. A stone cut without human hand smashed the statue; "then with one blow the iron, clay, bronze, silver, and gold were smashed and became like chaff coming from a threshing floor in summer, and the wind carried them away and no trace of them could be found. But the stone that struck the statue grew into a great mountain and filled the whole world" (Da 2:35). To Daniel is given the interpretation of the dream. Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon was the golden head; the other parts of the statue's body represented other empires to come. And the stone that smashed the statue? "At the time of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed; no other people will ever be permitted to rule over it; it will smash and bring to an end all these kingdoms and will stand forever" (Da 2:44).

That stone cut without human hand is the kingdom of the Son of David, pictured by Ezekiel, the prophet of the exile. With the coming of the Messiah God's faithful love would pour out upon the believing remnant of his people blessings which strained the prophets' ability to describe: "I will raise up one shepherd over them, My Servant David, who will feed them. He will feed them and be their Shepherd. I the LORD will be their God, and My Servant David will be the Ruler among them. I the LORD say so. I will make a covenant of peace with them and remove the wild beasts from the land so that people will live safely even in the wilderness and sleep in the woods. I will make them a blessing all around my hill. I will make the rain come down in its season; there will be showers of blessing. Then the trees in the field will produce their fruit, the land will yield its products, and the people will live safely on their land. They will know I am the LORD when I have broken the bars of their yokes and rescued them from those who made slaves of them. They will no more be a prey to the nations, nor will the beasts of the field devour them. They will live securely, and nobody will frighten them. I will cause their crops to thrive, and no more will famine in the land destroy them. They will no longer suffer the insults of the nations. They will know I the LORD their God am with them and they, Israel, are My people, says the Lord GOD. You, My sheep, are the flock of men that I pasture. I am your God, says the Lord GOD" (Ezekiel 34:23-31).

The end of all the mighty empires of the ancient world has a powerful message for Christians living in a great world power today. There is no indication that God will change the pattern of history. Unless the great day of the LORD comes first, America, our favored nation, will also someday be laid low. May we never make the mistake of placing our hope for security in any earthly power, whether it be governed by a king or by the people, whether it count its strength by number of horsemen or stockpile of nuclear bombs. Our trust must be in Jesus, the Son of David, the LORD's Anointed. We are safe because he steadily rules all things according to his faithful love for His Church. We can be secure as long as he is our God and we are his people. Then if the LORD continues to bless our American nation and our church in America with prosperity and peace, we will praise Him for it. But if God has harder times in store for America or for our American church in the century ahead, we will not be discouraged, either.

Though the fig tree should not blossom,

And there be no fruit on the vines,  
Though the yield of the olive should fail,  
And the fields produce no food,  
Though the flock should be cut off from the fold,  
And there be no cattle in the stalls,  
Yet I will exult in the LORD,  
I will rejoice in the God of my salvation. (Hab 3:17-19 NASB)

His kingdom come! His will be done on earth as it is in heaven!

#### **Some Questions for Discussion**

1. Humanly speaking, is the principal reason for our Synod's slow progress in inner city missions the unwillingness of people to hear our message or our unwillingness to teach them?
2. Is it anti-Semitism to deny that your Jewish neighbor worships the true God?
3. If a large business is using dishonest practices, how can a subordinate employee maintain his Christian confession?
4. Change "business" to "labor union" and "employee" to "member" and try the preceding question again.
5. Does putting our trust in God demand that we must favor American disarmament?

**Note:** Bible quotations from Isaiah and the New Testament are from the NIV. Other Old Testament passages, with one noted exception, are from Beck's American Translation.