

Scripture: Acts 10:1-43.

Text: Acts 10:35...."but in every nation any one who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him."

Topic: "Our Nation, God, and Other Nations."

Proposition: God is as much the God of other nations as of our own nation.

Date written: April 25, 1969.

Resources: Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible, vol. 2.

Funk & Wagnalls Dictionary of The Bible.

Revised Standard Version of the Bible.

Dates and places used:

April 27, 1969 Alcoa, Tenn.

"Our Nation, God and Other Nations" is the topic for this sermon, announced well in advance. As a subject for a Christian worship service, it should be considered in light of Biblical teaching, if there is any on the subject. Particularly, we should seek to bring to bear on the subject attitudes of Jesus and of the early Christians, as we find them recorded in the Bible. Unless we are concerned with finding as much as we can in the time available about Christian insight on the subject, and unless we want to commit ourselves to Christian action on behalf of our Christian insight, there is little excuse for spending time on this subject in a Christian service of worship.

However, the Bible has a great deal to say about nations, or nationalism, particularly in The Old Testament. It is a collection of writings which details much of the religious and national history of one people, the Jews, or Israelites. The Old Testament is a history in which religion and nationality are so strongly interwoven that they cannot be separated.

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In brief, the history of the Israelites is the history of a people made of 12 tribes who became convinced that they were the subjects of a special covenant, or agreement, with their God. At first, they thought of this God as one among many gods, with other peoples around them having their gods, but Israel having only one god (whereas other peoples might have several). Their God was, they believed, the creator of the universe, of life, and the most powerful of all gods. Over centuries of time, they came to think of this God of theirs as the only God, who particularly favored them over all the peoples of the earth, so long as they lived righteously and kept certain laws, which at their highest were summarized in The Ten Commandments.

As time went on, defeats and suffering caused some of their prophets and leaders to conceive of the Israelites as servants: servants of the one true God, and servants on his behalf of all peoples everywhere. This was a hard lesson to learn, and even at the

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time of Jesus the Israelites still had leaders who thought they were predestined to rule over all nations, not to live as servants among all peoples. Jesus was misunderstood on this score when he talked about the Kingdom of God, and the first Palm Sunday observance certainly included many of his admirers who thought he was going to set up an earthly kingdom. In fact, this misconception was the basis on which he was put to death. Jesus, nevertheless, helped and served people wherever he found them, whenever he could, regardless of their race or nation or color. Any who had faith in him were accepted by him as part of the kingdom of God.

This concept did not have the easiest of going in the early church, after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus. It finally did make it, though, and perhaps the experience and preaching of Peter as recorded in the Scripture that we read is the high point of acceptance in the early church of this concept that persons of all nations are equally acceptable to

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God and his Kingdom, the only condition being faith in Christ, or Christian outlook and attitude.

Turning from Biblical history to American history, we see many parallels. Much of what is now the United States was originally settled by peoples who came to this continent in order to be able to practice their religious beliefs and worship without governmental suppression and interference. It is true that sometimes they were so overzealous in such practice that they imposed almost by force their own beliefs on other people. However, this was not a really widespread practice over a long period of time. Because of the many different nationalities and religious outlooks represented among the immigrants to this country, both before and after the Revolutionary War, a degree of tolerance and mutual understanding among groups with very strong differences developed, which was unknown in most of the old countries. This, in turn, resulted in cooperation for the common good which enabled the new nation to

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develop rapidly in usage of the rich resources of the country, so that a rich and strong nation developed. Even the curse of slavery, developed chiefly in the southern economy of the nation, was finally abolished through a bloody Civil War, because of the conviction on the part of most of the people of our country that all people should be free. This concept has not worked out perfectly either but more so than in most countries.

Because of our prosperity and our dedication to democracy, we have engaged in World Wars I and II, and in the Korean and Vietnamese conflicts, under the hope of keeping the world safe for democracy, of preventing armed aggression which deprives others (wherever they are) of their rights, and of helping other peoples have freedoms. Up until now we have mostly had success in these enterprises. Along the way some of us have come to think of our nation as favored strongly and particularly by God, as more righteous than most nations. We point to the facts that we took no territory

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IN THE WARS WE'VE MENTIONED, THAT WE HELPED OUR FORMER ENEMY NATIONS recover so successfully that now they are among the world's most prosperous nations and among our strongest friends, that we have aided poor nations with massive economic and military assistance, that our young people act out their commitment to the ideals of love and service through such agencies as the Peace Corps. It puzzles and pains us to find that many of the peoples of the earth, including perhaps a majority of the very peoples we have tried to help, do not like us, or perhaps hate and despise us. Perhaps it dawned on us that we have become a bit too self-righteous, too smug about our intentions, and that maybe we are fooling ourselves.

In pre-publicity for this sermon, we pointed out that "to listen to some radio preachers one would think that to be a Christian you have to be an American; that God favors our nation more than any other nation; that one's duty as a Christian is first and foremost to one's nation; then to God,

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Christ and Church; that one cannot be a Christian and live in a communist country; and so on." We asked if these are true statements. What do you think? Let's look at some common, beloved American practices from which to help arrive at some answers.

In our Pledge of Allegiance to our flag, we use the phrase "one nation, under God, with liberty and justice for all." Do we mean that we are the only nation "under God?" Or course, few people mean that (though some may); but peoples of some nations have accused us of acting as if that's what we thought. We mean, don't we, that we are what it says, ONE nation under God, but that all nations are also under God, whether or not they are bent on knowing and doing God's will? We hope, however, that we also mean that we do seek to be aware of the will of the one God of all nations and of the universe; and that we seek to apply his will of love and concern for every person in the world through our national policies and practices.

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You have probably heard the saying, "My country, may she ever be right. But right or wrong, my country." I don't remember where it comes from, but it is often interpreted in varying ways. By the fanatic nationalist it is interpreted to mean that one must support his country no matter how wrong it is. Paradoxically, the more tyrannical and wrong a country gets, the more apt it is to impose harsh penalties on its citizens who may oppose its unjust policies. Another way of looking at this saying is that you love your nation, your country, even while perhaps disapproving of some of its policies and doing everything in your power to change them. It may be necessary at times, even, to use illegal means to resist wrongful government policies. Many people argue about this, but history is full of cases, such as that of Nazi Germany and its Jew-extermimating program, where people who loved their country resisted and were punished or killed by it. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, one of the "big names" in theological study today, was a German who loved his country, but

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who was put to death by it just hours before Allied troops took the camp where he was imprisoned. He was put to death because he conspired to kill Hitler, because he loved his country and thought that had to be done.

This brings us to think of those within communist-controlled countries today who may not like the suppression of speech and the dictation of private lives; who may still worship God through Christ in a country where this is officially somewhat dangerous. Certainly we admire such people, don't we? Surely they are every bit as christian as most of us who live in a country where private worship in ones own way is encouraged, and where we are all too apathetic about exercising this privilege. Surely the universal God is as interested in bringing about repentance and change among the communist leaders of such countries as he is in making such changes among the leaders of the Mafia, or among crooked government or industry operators in our own country, or elsewhere.

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All of this brings us back to our Scripture of today which give the message which is applicable ~~here~~ here. Peter, a Jew, a follower of Jesus, was called by a non-Jew, a Roman officer, to tell him about his God and Christ. Peter worried about this, and thought he couldn't do it for one of the hated oppressor empire. But he had a dream, a vision, which he interpreted as a message from God, which convinced him that any who would accept, from any and all nations, were acceptable as fellow-christians. So he preached, and the first thing he said was, "Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality, but that in every nation any one who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him." He then went on to point to his Jewish background as the channel through which God had brought Jesus, the Saviour of the World, emphasizing that Jesus came to all who would believe on him.

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Here is the clue, as people who live in and love our United States of America: The more we are favored with freedom and pros-

perity, through little real merit of our own, the more obligation we have to seek to extend these benefits to others. When we do so, we ought not to think of whether or not we are appreciated, or whether or not the needy people we help adapt our form of government or outlook. We are helping them simply because we see the need and are moved to help. We should want to praise, no gratitude, no credit, for the good we do. We are not trying to buy people's loyalty with our support.

God is as much the God of other nations as of our nation. In gratitude for our blessings of freedom and prosperity, we should do what we can to extend these benefits to other peoples. This, I believe, is the highest nationalism, the best patriotism. We must work on two fronts, at home and in other countries, but that is another topic!

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