

# **The Church— Its Uniqueness, Distinctiveness, and “Exceptionalism”**

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## **Introduction**

While fighting a war against terrorism that seeks to destroy our nation from without, it is also in the throes of a crucial civil war. This war is not (at least not yet) being fought with the hardware of physical combat. It is a philosophical and ideological engagement; its weapons are ideas and words. The assaults are aimed at the very heart of that which constitutes the United States of America—that which makes our nation unique. Some call it a “culture war,” and this may be a good term for it. *The Random House College Dictionary* defines *culture* in its sociological application as “the sum total of ways of living built up by a group of human beings and transmitted from one generation to another.”

## **The “Culture War” in the U.S.**

The internal enemies of our land are seeking to drastically alter America. They want to tear down that which has made us the envy of all the other nations for over two centuries. Their cultural assaults began (although comparatively behind the scenes) several decades ago. Generations up to and including my parents would not have tolerated the brazen anti-God, anti-Bible, anti-“Christian” campaign that is now so prevalent. The denouncers were wily enough to know that, so they have bided their time.

They have gradually made their way into places of great influence in religious, educational, governmental, entertainment, and news media institutions nationwide. This loud segment of the U.S. citizenry obviously despises the very things that have defined America from its inception, including, but not limited to, such things as:

- Unblushing pronouncements of faith in God by almost all of our Founding Fathers as reflected in their policy papers and letters and in the Founding Documents
- The Bill of Rights, which document rightly credits God, rather than any man, as the Bestower of said rights
- Adherence to a single unifying source of authority—our Constitution
- Laws made by representatives of its citizens and the determination to be governed by laws rather than by men—particularly unelected judges
- Free expression of religion
- Free speech
- A superior personal and national moral compass based upon Biblical principles

These quislings have become increasingly bold in their attempts to force us into the mold of some of the irreligious, amoral, and unprincipled nations who are jealous of the success of the “American experiment” and of our place in the world due to this success. University campuses are dominated by Bible-hating, God-hating left-wing professors who detest the things that have made our civilization exceptional in all of history. They have corrupted the minds of millions of youngsters for at least two generations. In this same period, major theological schools have produced thousands of faithless pulpiteers who have robbed millions of their faith in God and the Bible.

These forces have Atheistic/Humanistic roots, and their aim is to reshape our nation after the total moral corruption that has spelled decay and doom for every once-mighty empire/nation that has gone before. Their efforts have been successful in such things as legalization of abortion, decriminalization of sodomy, producing a sex-crazed society, teaching—through our tax dollars—our children how to commit fornication “safely,” clouding the meaning of *marriage*, and practically destroying the distinction between good and evil and truth and error. These and like factors relate directly to Biblical principles. The forces of wickedness know that they must succeed in outlawing the Bible in order to destroy America’s uniqueness.

Organizations such as the misnamed “American Civil Liberties Union” (ACLU) and sister organizations are engaged in an all-out war in their efforts to rewrite history and to remove from public display or expression anything remotely relating to respect for the Bible. This fact is too obvious to miss. These forces do not oppose “religion,” per se. Islam, the major Eastern cults, the offbeat religions of New Ageism, Wicca (witchcraft), “Native American” paganism, Scientology, Baha’ism, and such like are not only tolerated, but encouraged and exalted. While this element screams at the suggestion that some American may have handled the Koran so as to offend terrorists, it would seize and burn every Bible if it could. (Ironically, although the counter-culturists vociferously oppose the display of the Ten Commandments, they have not attacked Judaism to any great degree, likely because they recognize that modern “Judaism” does not believe in the Bible [except the land promise to Abraham, of course].)

If the anti-Bible radicals prevail, their conquest will amount to The American Revolution II, but unlike the first, it will be a counter-revolution in which evil overthrows good and tyranny overthrows freedom this time. It will also likely be done without the firing of a single shot. Make no mistake: These powers of darkness are bent on extirpating the very factors—Biblical principles—that have made the U.S. unique. **For this very reason** they are waging all-out war against all things pertaining to the Bible. Also, **for this very reason**, persecution of those who

express their belief in the Bible or its principles is steadily increasing, often with the courts of our land as willing accomplices.

*Uniqueness* is a key word in this cultural clash. *The Random House College Dictionary* defines this word as “existing as the only one or as a sole example; single; solitary in type or characteristics.... Having no like or equal; standing alone in quality, incomparable.” Those who seek to turn our historic and traditional values topsy-turvy despise America’s uniqueness. In his powerful best-seller, *Winning the Future*, Newt Gingrich lists five great threats to our nation. After naming as numbers 1 and 2, respectively, the threats of terrorism and the danger that “God will be driven from American public life,” he then stated number 3: “That America will lose the patriotic sense of itself as a unique civilization” (p. xii). A little later, he connects numbers 2 and 3, as he writes of “how integral God is to understanding American exceptionalism...” (p. xiv). In discussing assaults on our national uniqueness, Gingrich observes:

One of the most insidious assaults on American exceptionalism has been the rise of dual citizenship in which people no longer have to renounce allegiance to any other government in order to become Americans (p. 89).

*Exceptionalism*, a word too new to be in the dictionary, is one of which we will increasingly hear and read. It is a new synonym for “uniqueness.” The radical anti-God, anti-Bible crowd despises America’s exceptionalism and uniqueness, a distinctiveness rooted in the U.S. Constitution. They want our nation merely to blend into multi-national insipid insignificance, as the atheistic and immoral nations of Europe have largely done over the past century. They are more concerned with what other nations think of us and say about us (and bowing to those opinions) than they are with faithfulness to our foundation principles.

### **The “Culture War” in the Church**

As I have occasionally observed on these pages, “Liberals will be liberals,” whether in politics or in religion. While fighting a great spiritual battle with Satan’s hosts without, for almost half a century the Lord’s church has endured an ever intensifying “culture war” within. Just as the radical element in our nation cannot tolerate its uniqueness and exceptionalism, liberals in the church cannot stand the Scriptural concept of its uniqueness, distinctiveness, and exceptionalism. This antipathy is the stimulus for their constant calls for and engagements in broader fellowship. Some are more transparent than others in this regard. Carroll D. Osburn lamented:

Instead of playing a leading role in American religious thought, the Restoration Movement finds itself awash in the backwaters, while the mainstream of religious thought passes by with hardly a nod in our direction (*The Peaceable Kingdom*, [Abilene, TX: Restoration Perspectives, 1993], p. 13).

Osburn believes brotherhood colleges and universities are pivotal in curing this image deficiency:

An outdated curriculum from a sectarian past that placed emphasis upon transmitting doctrinaire positions will not suffice if we would engage convincingly the larger arenas of current religious thought.... Working together [i.e., with other faculty members] in common collegiality, we must expect of one another the highest level of academic and spiritual excellence if we would become prophetic thought-leaders among a broadened constituency in a post-sectarian era. (pp. 15–16).

Obviously, most of the schools (certainly the one at which Osburn taught the past seventeen years—Abilene Christian University) have followed his formula to a remarkable degree. Note his yearning for respectability in “the larger arenas of current religious thought.” Note also his description of the millions over almost two centuries who have devoted their lives to faithful adherence to the Word of God as the “sectarian past,” while gleefully declaring the present as “post-sectarian.” He seeks a “broadened constituency.” He demonstrates liberal pomposity and conceit at its best/worst. However, he is not through. He eventually explicitly defines the glorious result of his new, liberating theology: “**Rejecting arrogant exclusivism, Christian fellowship is extended to a broader arena**” (p. 64).

Osburn doubtless speaks for his fellow-liberals. They are doing their best to cause the church of the Bible to merely coalesce into the larger body of multi-denominational pluralism and disappear in insipid insignificance. To them, sacrificing the very Biblical principles that make the Lord’s church distinctive is well worth the end of achieving that lovely “broader arena” of fellowship. This project of amalgamation with denominationalism has been going on for a long time. It perhaps received its greatest impetus in our era, however, from the annual “Unity Forums” with the Independent Christian Church, beginning in 1984. I suppose we should not expect these ivory tower professors to endure the agony of being considered narrow-minded by their denominational peers.

*The Christian Chronicle* now apparently considers as one fellowship the Independent Christian Church, the radical Disciples of Christ Christian Church, and the religious body the *Chronicle* represents (the “Church of Christ” [not necessarily the Lord’s, church, mind you]). What else can one conclude when he reads a large advertisement in its December 2004 edition (p. 15) seeking a new President for the Disciples of Christ Historical Society? This ad was a nice fit with the *Chronicle*’s ecumenical approach to fellowship, since the ad sought a person “committed to reconciliation” and one with “a commitment to and knowledge of all traditions in the Stone-Campbell Movement.” Perhaps even more telling concerning the *Chronicle*’s ecumenism is a photo and note in the June 2004 issue (p. 27). Under its *NEWSMAKERS*

heading appear snippets of news concerning those who are “named,” “appointed,” “honored,” and such like. One of the announced appointees is the new President of the Disciples of Christ Historical Society (per the ad above). His name is Glenn Carson, identified as “moderator of the Greater Kansas City Region Disciples Ministers Association.” There is not one word to distinguish him as different from the others in the lists, all of whom are members of the church. But why not congratulate Carson? After all, the *Chronicle* was willing to help the Disciples fill the position.

Perhaps professor Osburn does not realize the implication of his last-quoted remark above. If those who insist upon a pure Gospel and a pure church are guilty of “arrogant exclusivism,” then we are not in bad company. Had Osburn been a Jew in the time of Joshua, he doubtless would have railed against Jehovah’s “arrogant exclusivism” in giving His law only to Israel and in demanding the Hebrews extend no fellowship to the Canaanite nations (Exo. 34:10–16).

By the Osburn dictum, Jesus was an “arrogant exclusivist” when He said: “Every plant which my heavenly Father planted not, shall be rooted up” (Mat. 15:13) and “He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that disbelieveth shall be condemned” (Mark 16:16). The Lord’s statement to the apostles, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life: no one cometh unto the Father, but by me” (John 14:6), must really be upsetting to the broad-minded Osburn and his ilk. Perhaps he has forgotten what some other “arrogant exclusivists” have said:

1. Peter: “For neither is there any other name under heaven, that is given among men, wherein we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).
2. Paul: “But though we, or an angel from heaven, should preach unto you any gospel other than that which we preached unto you, let him be anathema” (Gal. 1:8). “The church, which is his body.... There is one body...” (Eph. 1:22–23; 4:4). “And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather even reprove them” (5:11).
3. John: “He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him” (1 John 2:4). “If any one cometh unto you, and bringeth not this teaching, receive him not into your house, and give him no greeting: for he that giveth him greeting partaketh in his evil works” (2 John 10–11).

It should be apparent to the most casual reader of Holy Writ that the Gospel of Christ, and therefore the church of Christ which it produces, is unique, distinctive, and exceptional. Let us not be moved from this undeniable principle of Scripture by the accusing, whining, and condescending remarks of men who have abandoned the Truth.

As noted above, the third great threat to our nation's exceptionalism in Gingrich's list is allowing people to hold dual citizenship. This threat also has its parallel in the church as change agents seek to draw the church completely unto denominational fellowship and status. Increasing numbers of folk have been added to congregational rolls in recent years who have not renounced all other spiritual and religious loyalties. The Bible has a word for this spiritual "citizenship" requirement: *repentance*. Some of these came in through "quickie conversions" wherein someone persuaded them to be baptized without teaching them anything about the church. The church is merely another denomination to them—perhaps a little closer to the Truth than others.

Others have been greeted and welcomed into fellowship (i.e., allowed to "place membership") without having been baptized for remission of sins (Acts 2:38). Thus Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, Pentecostals, and others have been allowed to believe (mistakenly) that they can keep their former religious loyalties and merely add another denomination—the "Church of Christ." They have never been made to see the significance of Jesus' words to Nicodemus: "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except one be born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God!" (John 3:5).

### **Conclusion**

The church of Christ is an exceptional, unique, exclusive body, and the Gospel is a message of exclusion as well as of inclusion. It includes only those who, upon hearing the Word, believe it, repent of their sins (which means renouncing and turning away from all errors, whether in doctrine or practice), confess Jesus as the Son of God and as one's Lord (no divided allegiance), and are baptized in order to be saved by the blood of Christ (Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38; 8:36–39; 22:16; Rom. 10:9–10; Rev. 1:5; et al.). **Only** when one has thus been "born again" does he enter the kingdom and does the Lord add him to His church (John 3:5; Acts 2:41, 47). **The Lord excludes all others.** The Son of God, not men, originated this doctrine of religious "exceptionalism." If agreeing with Him concerning the boundaries of His blood-bought church (Acts 20:28) makes us guilty of "arrogant exclusivism," we should eagerly embrace such "guilt." We dare never be ashamed of the kingdom's exceptionalism, everywhere advocated in the New Testament.

**[Note:** I wrote this MS, and it originally appeared as an "Editorial Perspective" in the July 2005 issue of *THE GOSPEL JOURNAL*, a 36-page monthly of which I was editor at the time.]

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