

Lutheran Witness Article (unpublished)

By
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Mark Noll, a Wheaton College historian, in his book One Nation Under God, noted that the Lutheran perspective on church and state is valuable. However, mainly due to historical circumstances, this contribution has been largely ignored.

According to Noll, English Protestants were intrigued with Luther's thought. Nevertheless, Protestants exiled from England during the reign of Catholic Queen Mary (1554-1558) sought refuge in lands dominated by reformed theology. These Protestants returned to England with Calvinistic tendencies. Especially influenced were the English Puritans. Upon immigration to America, they became zealous to reform church and state.

Although reformed and Lutheran theology have much in common, an important difference is the attitude toward social and political action. Reformed or Calvinistic thought accentuates holiness or sanctification, whereas Lutherans emphasize the cross of Christ or justification. Lutherans have traditionally focused on church renewal; Calvinists, on the other hand, have stressed the reformation of society. This is only a question of emphasis, not one of exclusive neglect of the other point of view. Reformed theology, brought by our English forebears, has been dominant among evangelicals in America. It is important for Christians to ask the question - Is it truly God's intent for the United States to be a Christian nation?

The United States indeed has a Christian aspect to its heritage. However, there is another side to the story. Eighteenth century enlightenment was dominated by several characteristics, among which were religious tolerance, sincerity as a test of orthodoxy, natural religion and deism, and the belief in man's own ability to improve himself. According to Paul Hazard, author of European Thought in the Eighteenth Century, an organization called Freemasonry "became one of the most conspicuous centres of activity in the age of enlightenment. If one were to trace the stages in the progressive conquest, we should see how the great communication centres, seaports, capital cities, all fell before it."

Interesting reading is Revolution and Freemasonry by Bernard Fay. The tales of Benjamin Franklin's escapades in London would make good screenplay for today's x-rated cinema! Although our first president, George Washington, may well have been a Godly man, his devotion to the Christian faith remains questionable, despite his early prayers, written while still a youth. Joining a Masonic lodge at the age of twenty, he remained a lifelong Mason. He often described God as, "the great architect or divine providence," vocabulary familiar to Masons. Masons do believe in God, as atheism is forbidden for lodge members. However, the Masonic god is not the Christian God, and anyone who examines Washington's writings will be hard-pressed to discover a belief in the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

Is it reasonable to expect an unconverted populace to behave like Christians? Our Lutheran heritage would call us instead to pray for the renewal of the church, to be "the light of the world and salt that has not lost its savor." As noted by Brother Andrew, "you cannot put a tepid Christianity against a raging paganism." When will we "again see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not?" (Malachi 3:18)

I pray that it may be so, and the perspective of a revived church which calls sinners to repentance will bless our nation.