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THE FIRST PRINCIPLE

God can both bless and curse a nation.

“GOD BLESS AMERICA!” is enthusiastically sung by the vast majority of Americans. We all want “God” to bless America, but truth be told, all who sing this song do not agree on the meaning of the phrase. The word “God” in the song cries out for definition.

All of us know that in recent decades, God has been banished from the so-called “public square” in American life. He has been evicted from education, from law, and from the workplace. In some schools, children are not allowed to draw a picture of the Nativity at Christmastime. Indeed, only a couple years ago one judge told a high school valedictorian, “If you mention Jesus in your valedictory address, you will wish you had never been born.”

But when the 9/11 terrorist attacks happened, “God bless America” signs were everywhere, even on marquee signs on porn shops. Everyone thought that surely God could be trusted to

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come to our side in this war against terror. What could be more obvious than the fact that we have stood for democracy, financial opportunity, and freedom? Think of the good America has done around the world! Of course God is on our side, and if He isn't, He *ought* to be!

THE BANISHED GOD, RETRIEVED

So after 9/11, to borrow a phrase from R. C. Sproul, God was “allowed off the reservation” for a few months to fulfill His responsibility to bless us. But once our nation felt secure again, God was safely tucked away, church attendance declined, and the so-called wall of separation of church and state was built a notch higher. God is even less welcome now in the affairs of our public life than He was before 9/11. Recently, I read about a girl who was wearing a chastity bracelet signifying her intention to be a virgin until she marries, but it was banned from the school because it was deemed religious.

God is consistently banished from science, economics, history, education, and government. The role of religion, we are told, is to bless the soul, but not to interfere with our lifestyle or public policy. When I was in China in 1986, I asked a tour guide about freedom of religion. She replied, “Of course we have freedom of religion here in China; people can be as religious as they want to be *within their own minds!*” So it is; many here in America would agree that religion can coexist with government as long as our beliefs are strictly private, as long as they are confined to our minds.

Clearly, the God who was briefly allowed to reenter American public life was not the God of the Bible but the God of our civil religion. This God is described by Sproul as a certain kind of being. “He is a deity without sovereignty, a god without wrath, a judge without judgment, and a force without power.”¹ Or, to say it differently, the God many people sang about was just “a bigger one of us.”

Almost every State of the Union message delivered since 1984 has ended with the president declaring, “May God bless America.”² This phrase should reflect a desire for God’s guidance and approval, but often it sounds like a special incantation to provide hope for the future and to obtain any extra help we can. And even during the election season, the 2008 presidential candidates continued to call upon God to bless our country.

During the months following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, God was expected to put His approval on the American way of life without expecting us to repent of our sins. He was briefly allowed into our public life only to give us benefits, not to judge us for our sins. The God who was allowed off the reservation was a God who was only allowed to bless us—not a God who could possibly have anything to do with evil people flying planes into New York’s Twin Towers.

But listen to these words of God through Moses, when speaking to the nation of Israel:

See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse—the blessing, if you obey the commandments of the Lord your God, which I command you today; and the curse, if you do not obey

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the commandments of the Lord your God, but turn aside from the way that I am commanding you today, to go after other gods that you have not known.” (Deuteronomy 11:26–28)

So there it is: God gave Israel a choice of either being blessed or being cursed. And although America does not have a covenant with God, the principle applies: God does not merely bless people and nations, He judges and curses them as well.

Clearly, these words from God were not spoken by the God of American civil religion. The God of Moses is not like a book on a shelf that can be taken down when needed and then put back when we grow tired of it. So, when many people say “God bless America,” they mean various things. They may simply mean, “Lord, I pray that You will protect us; especially I pray that my family might not die,” or “May I live in good health, may I be able to pay my mortgage, and above all, Lord, may the stock market not fall so my retirement is secure.” They implore the God who does not call upon us to forsake our cultural idols but rather invites us to indulge ourselves. This is the God of the American flag. In contrast, the God of Moses and of the Old Testament Scriptures is the God who invites us to choose: “Choose Me and receive blessing; disobey Me and be cursed.”

GOD ON A LEASH

Several years have passed since the 9/11 attacks—a time of tragedy when God was used like cleaning fluid to mop up the spill and, when finished, put back into the cupboard. Today He

is told to stay put on the other side of the wall of separation of church and state. There He is expected to wait patiently until we have another tragedy—and then we'll carefully bring Him out on a leash so that He can bless us once more. To quote Sproul again, "We allow for God's providence as long as it is a blessing, but we have no room for God's providence if that providence represents some kind of judgment."³

But the God of the Bible does not limit Himself to blessing a nation.

Consider: Although the nation Israel was in covenant relationship with Yahweh and therefore could claim His blessing in ways that we cannot, even they were often severely judged. Twice God had other nations take His own covenant people from the land He gave them and had them transported to other nations as a judgment. The ten northern tribes were carried off to Assyria; the southern tribes of Judah and Simeon were taken to Babylon for seventy years, until almost all the older people died and only their children could return. All these judgments and others too numerous to count were brought on by God to judge His own covenant people!

Startling though it might seem, there are times when God actually is described as fighting against His own people, "But they rebelled and grieved his Holy Spirit; therefore he turned to be their enemy, and himself fought *against* them" (Isaiah 63:10, italics added). Imagine, God fighting against His own people! If Israel could not take His blessings for granted, neither can we.

If God so severely judged a nation that had a unique covenantal relationship with Him, think of how He might judge

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America, a nation that cannot claim such a relationship. The God of the Bible will not endlessly tolerate idolatry and benign neglect. He graciously endures rejection and insults, but at some point, He might choose to bring a nation to its knees with severe discipline. As we shall see, sometimes those nations never recover.

ON GOD'S SIDE

1. Describe the wall of separation between church and state. In what ways does a view of God as “the God of our civil religion” fall short of the God of the Bible?
2. Discuss some ways God has been banished from science, economics, history, education, and government. What impact has His banishment from those disciplines had on our culture, our families, and even the church?
3. What does Deuteronomy 11:26 teach us? Can we expect God to bless our nation, even if we do not repent of our sins?
4. The Bible tells us that God judged His people, Israel, by allowing their enemies to take them into captivity. In America, what are some obvious cultural idols or examples of neglect of God that could bring His judgment?