

The Church and the Nations

God's Call
to the Church
of our Generation

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Mark W. Weaver

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See, I have this day set thee over the nations and over the kingdoms, to root out, and to pull down, and to destroy, and to throw down, to build, and to plant.

Jeremiah 1: 10 KJV

YOUR GOD or our Government? Which will you serve?

With these words, the nation's elite—government leaders, the wealthy and celebrated, the polls and the pundits and even many educators—threw down a gauntlet to the everyday citizen. From that moment, the mighty empire began its fade into history.

For generations the magnificent kingdom had been a nation among nations, a world leader—the most powerful empire in the earth. Its influence had spread across the globe. Its military might had become legendary. But now with little fanfare, it quietly slipped from the world stage, assimilated into the culture once anathema to its own.

Signs of ruin had dotted the landscape for some time. But no one noticed—or cared. Idolatry, adultery, sexual perversion, drunkenness, treachery, deception, manipulation, violence, bloodshed, and rebellion had become the most telling earmark of its once civilized life. Collapse became inevitable.

At the apex of its glory, the nation's upper echelon began to make mockery of Christians. True believers became objects of ridicule, often blamed for the ills of society. And many valiantly surrendered their lives, refusing to bend their knee to national idols.

But in a twist of irony, the martyrs' lives became seeds. In an odd paradox, the nation's demise marked the sprouting of a new age. For when Rome succumbed to Christianity, a fresh culture emerged—the enemy culture once anathema to Rome. This culture became a new kingdom, grown from truth and integrity.

Soon, the seed had to be sown again. Even as the fresh culture began to sprout, it too withered. For as the Master said, "Unless a grain of wheat fall into the ground and die, it cannot bring forth fruit."¹ Twelve hundred years elapsed. And then, at the precise moment God had prescribed, one man nailed a list of ninety-five complaints to the door of a church in Wittenburg, Germany.

Christianity has been the primary guiding force of western civilization.

From that moment until our day, Christianity has been the guiding force of western civilization.

Today we stand again on the threshold of a new age. But which age will it be? Will sin and darkness prevail? Or will a new, even stronger Church emerge from the shadows, a Church mature and grown, rising above its own internal discord, ready to lead the nations towards God's glory?

How did our own nation come to be? What role did the Church have to play? Perhaps even more importantly for us, how will our nation's future will play out? Is God going to restore us? Or is He going to bring judgment? Will He return to rescue the Christians before things get really bad? Maybe He will bring restoration through judgment. Will the near-purity of our

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founding fathers' original vision ever return? Or will God just let us wither on the vine like so many other nations in history?

These unanswered questions bring a measure of uneasiness even to the most passionate of believers. For though we trust ultimately in God, most of us still enjoy living in our time and culture. Few of us would welcome a cataclysmic shift that threw our lives into chaos. And yet we know intuitively that change must come. What will awaken us?

For generations in America, the Church and the civil government co-existed on friendly terms.

Some of us pray for revival. Others engage in political activity. Many focus on providing a Christian education and a Biblical foundation for the children. Almost all of us believe our nation's slide and world events are indications of Christ's imminent return. Some just push away the negative thoughts hoping it will all work itself out.

We know of course, that it won't. We should do something, but what?

Historically, the Church has played a very active role in shaping our culture. Prior to the Civil War, many Christians, fresh out of revival, led or joined the abolitionist movement. In the late 1800's, Christians founded organizations such as the Women Christian Temperance Union, the Salvation Army, the Young Men's Christian Association and many others. All were birthed in prayer. All have served to instill Christian character and elevate the moral behavior of individuals in our society.

More recently the Civil Rights movement of the 1950's and '60's began with prayer in Southern black churches that eventually resulted in massive legislative changes at the highest levels of government. In our day, pro-life pregnancy centers, Christian drug counseling programs and other service organizations born in prayer are helping individuals to recapture their God-given dignity and to accept personal responsibility for their behavior in the midst of moral decay.

For generations in America, the Church and the civil government co-existed on friendly terms. Public officials recognized the Church's positive role in society. The Church held up the standard of God's word in the midst of everyday life and shaped our nation into the world's moral leader.

*Can one nation serve two masters?
Can a nation worship both God
and Mammon?*

But our generation has witnessed the near-demise of the Judeo-Christian substructure supporting our public institutions. Oddly, government officials, public educators and the cultural elite often view Christians as adversaries and their ideas as a threat to individual freedoms. Today, Christian values are commonly belittled. Christians are frequently categorized as moral bigots. And the Church is often scorned.

What went wrong? Why are the state and the Church, once partners, now antagonistic toward one another? Why has the Church, once a trusted friend, now become an outsider in American culture and society?

Can one nation serve two masters? Can good and evil co-exist side by side? Were insidious seeds planted alongside Christian

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seeds at our own nation's founding? Can a nation worship both God and Mammon?

Above all, how can the Church re-gain respectability in our land?

Scripture and history provide clear answers. Jeremiah 1:10 supplies the framework for our contemplation.

"See, I have this day set thee over the nations and over the kingdoms, to root out, and to pull down, and to destroy, and to throw down, to build, and to plant."

(Jer. 1:10 KJV)

Scripture often employs imagery to convey God's ideas. In this passage, God utilizes the imagery of plant growth and building construction to communicate the nature of Jeremiah's prophetic work. The prophetic work of the Church in our nation today is strikingly similar.

In Jeremiah 1:10 we observe three aspects of God's call upon the prophet's life. **First**, God admonishes Jeremiah to consider his call.

"See, I have this day set thee over the nations and over the kingdoms..."

In this scriptural passage, the literal rendering of the word **see** is "advise yourself" or "take heed." God encourages Jeremiah to look at and consider his prophetic calling. He challenges the prophet to hear and respond.

Before the Church or any one individual can fulfill God's purpose, we must first understand what that purpose is. The following story will help elucidate this need.

Gideon feared the Midianites. He was so afraid that he hid beneath a grape press as he threshed wheat from his father's farm in the small town of Ophrah. Then one day, the Angel of the Lord appeared to him. "Mighty soldier, the Lord is with you!" the Angel said.

Gideon cowered. "If the Lord is with us," he replied, "why have all these bad things happened to us? God did wonders and miracles when he brought our ancestors out of Egypt. Where are our miracles? Why has the Lord forsaken us and allowed the Midianites to overrun us?"

Gideon set down his scythe and stepped over the pile of grain. "Many Israelis have fled to the mountains. They live in caves and dens. After we'd planted our fields, Midian raiders came and destroyed our crops. They've plundered the entire countryside as far away as Gaza. They've left us nothing to eat and they've taken our sheep, oxen, and donkeys."

Then the Lord himself spoke directly to Gideon. "I have come to tell you that I have chosen you to go and make war with the Midianites--to save Israel. Go. I will make you strong and mighty."

"Me?" Gideon replied, "How can I save Israel?"

Then God replied, "I will be with you! You shall quickly destroy the Midianites!"

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Like most of us, Gideon had difficulty taking God at his word. He wanted proof that God had spoken before he would trust him. God obliged Gideon's doubt and performed a miracle. Then Gideon built an altar and called it "The Altar of Peace with Jehovah."

That night God instructed Gideon to pull down Ophrah's altar to Baal, cut down the wooden idol of Asherah, build an altar to God and use the idol as kindling for a fire to consume a sacrificial offering. Though fearful at first, Gideon obeyed. Afterwards, Gideon went on to raise an army and defeat the Midianites. But not after he first put the Lord to the test two more times.

Gideon eventually heard and responded. But not without some serious coaxing from the Lord. Moses, too, had difficulty responding to the Lord's call. "... I am slow of speech..." (Exod 4:10) he complained. The prophet Jeremiah also questioned God's choice. "...I do not know how to speak. I am only a child." (Jer 1:6). And Jonah deliberately took a ship to the wrong city—Tarshish—after God had instructed him to go to Nineveh.

"Today's Church seems uncertain about assuming its full prophetic role in our nation."

Gideon, Moses, Jeremiah, Jonah and other Biblical prophets did not immediately rush to embrace God's call and follow his instructions. Much like these reluctant servants, today's Church likewise seems uncertain about assuming its full prophetic role in our nation.

Perhaps the present-day Church needs a fresh perspective on God's prophetic call.

What exactly has God called us to do?

Do we today, like Jeremiah, Gideon, Moses and Jonah, see all that God has called us to see? Do we truly understand God's mission for His Church? Do we really comprehend His purposes for us among the nations—within our own nation?

Is God still in the kingdom business? Or is He only in the redemption business now? Are we called only to win souls or are we also called to win nations? Like the prophet Jeremiah, the Church must *see* before it can fulfill its call.

God goes on to define the nature of Jeremiah's prophetic mantle.

"See, I have this day set thee over the nations and over the kingdoms ..."

Here, the word **over** is translated from the Hebrew word "al" meaning above or beyond. Jeremiah had been chosen to bear God's own authority—to sit above the nations, transcendent over them in his bearing of God's authority, and to deliver God's word. God was going to—and did—bring judgment through the prophet.

Like Jeremiah, the Church too has been given God's authority.

... All power (authority) is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore ...
(Matt 28:18-19 KJV)

We have been commissioned by Jesus Christ to take His imparted, delegated authority and go into the world with His message. The Church has been empowered with His gifts, His vision, his heart and His burden.

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We have been given His name which represents His power and authority.

Finally, God described the scope of the prophet's realm of influence.

*"See, I have this day set thee over
the nations and ... the
kingdoms ..."*

In this passage, the Hebrew word for nations is "gowy" which means literally "the Gentiles." God is thus not limiting the scope of the prophet's authority to the Hebrews. Jeremiah is to possess authority over the Gentile nations as well.

Again, like Jeremiah, the Church's mission field is the nations of this world. We are called and commissioned to make them into His disciples.

The Church then, like the prophets of old, is seated above the nations. We are to bear Christ's prophetic mantle today—in our world and in our time. But before we can ever hope to achieve His mission for us, we must first learn to *see* or understand His call.

*The Church, like the prophets of
old, is seated above the nations.*

In the second section of Jeremiah 1:10 we learn more specifically the nature of our mission.

*"... to root out, and to pull down,
and to destroy, and to throw down,
..."*

Many obstacles impede the work of the gospel. Ungodly structures clutter the ground. Toxic plantings choke the soil. Vain and false philosophies permeate our

universities, highschoools and even our elementary schools. Our airwaves and printed pages burst with ungodly values and ideas.

How can we build and plant (the third part of our calling) if we don't first demolish and uproot? Can any of America's current cultural darkness be blamed on the failure of the Church? What evil seeds did our Christian forebears tolerate or even plant? What steps must first be taken by today's Church before we can truly tear down the idols of our modern day culture?

Finally, in the last section of Jeremiah 1:10 we discover that the Church's earthly mission is building and planting.

"to build and to plant."

Jesus commissioned us to instruct and to teach, to disciple our nation, to help restore our nation's citizenry to a right relationship with God and to inspire and instill a core set of essential biblical values.

The Church's mission is summarized as follows: First, we are called to *see* or understand that God has set us over the nations and over the kingdoms.

Where there is no vision, the people perish ...
(Proverbs 29:18 KJV)

Second, He has called us to *uproot* and *demolish* the ungodly structures and plantings that poison and clutter the spiritual and cultural soil of our nation.

*Casting down imaginations, and
every high thing that exalteth itself
against the knowledge of God, and
bringing into captivity every*

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thought to the obedience of Christ;
(2 Cor 10:5 KJV)

Finally, Christ has commissioned us to **build** and **plant** structures and seeds that bear His glory and produce heavenly fruit.

Go ye therefore, and teach all nations ...
(Matt 28:19 KJV)

How are nations shaped and formed? Do powerful ideas and values, and the gods a nation worships shape their governments and institutions? Why does God bless some nations and bring others to judgment? What must happen for the Church to be restored to its prophetic role in our culture today?