

Book Review

Myth of a Christian Nation

Gregory Boyd

(Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005) 207 pages

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In the wake of continued convulsion over the past decade between the evangelical church of Jesus Christ and the American civil religion, many have been left to ponder the location of the line that separates American and Kingdom of God citizenry. For millions of individuals the mixture of politics and gospel proclamation are welcome bedfellows that fit with each other in a way most naturally. For many others however, the cohabitation of these two great forces is as polarized as oil and water.

In this book, author Gregory Boyd goes to great lengths to demonstrate not only whether there is a difference between authentic Christianity and the American civil religion, but also that there is an insurmountable expanse between the two—making the notion that the United States (or any other nation) is a Christian nation both crass and mute.

For Boyd the differences between what is kingdom of the world and Kingdom of God are stark. Where as it is undoubted that God uses the nations of the world at times for His purposes along with establishing the leaders of the worldly kingdoms (Rom. 13:1, 3-4), the world also remains very much under the control of Satan and his demonic influences in nations (Luke 4:5-7, 1 John 5:19). Also, though all humanity holds membership in one or more kingdoms of the world, Christians are to, as the Scriptures say, live

“in but not of the world” (John 17). The kingdoms of the world function through the exertion of “power-over” policies; that is, elevation through the subduing of others. Worldly kingdoms and people put others down, carry out acts of destruction, and are selective in their morality as suits their individual and national interests. This is illustrated time and again throughout the history of the world.

Boyd enthusiastically supports a position of “power-under” influence, being the posture of leadership taken by Jesus and repeated by the followers of Christ in the early centuries. Illustrating the overwhelming difference, Boyd repeatedly refers to the world as ruling through the sword while Christ rules with a towel. Boyd asserts that service to others; the idea of the greatest servant being the greatest of all—a concept completely foreign to the kingdoms of the world—is in fact the only way that followers of Jesus Christ should seek to advance in life. With this as the guiding principle for Christian life, it makes it impossible for the believer to participate in most of the world’s devices. It is only through “power-under” servant leadership that the Kingdom of God is ultimately advanced.

The author recognizes that much good can at times come through the “power-over” approach. The problem is that that “power-over” tactics, while dealing with the

manifestation of issues, can never touch the heart of the problem. Will any homosexual person be led to the LORD and experience subsequent life change by a country outlawing gay marriage? Will young people be better equipped to control lust by the church mandating an abstinence-only sexual education course? Undoubtedly some, and maybe a lot of good, will come from “power-over” tactics, but Christ did not come so that the kingdoms of the world would be better. If that were the case, there would have been no need for Him to die. At any time He could have ordered the legions of angels at His command to overthrow the earthly governments. Instead He came to demonstrate that life change occurs through submission to God and service to each other.

Boyd believes that most Americans who also identify themselves as Christians are disillusioned by the foundational myth that America was at one time a Christian nation, and that it is our responsibility to, as the popular bumper sticker slogan declares, “Take America Back for God!” He wonders (as do I), when this time in American history was? Was it 50 years ago, when Jim Crow laws dominated the south? Was it 100 years ago when women were not given the same rights as men? Was it 150 years ago when blacks were still enslaved? Was it 200 years ago as Native Americans were being systematically annihilated? When was this time in American history when the Great Commandment to “love God and love your neighbor,” which sums up the Christian life, was lived out?

In Boyd’s final chapter, he provides the much-needed practical application for the theory of the book in the form of five tough questions concerning Christians and violence. Three thoughts come to mind as I review it. First of all, where Boyd was quick

to address Christians and military service, the naturally logical progression of this line of thinking moves to Christians as police officers. This topic was never discussed, and I believe the book is poorer for it. Second, his conversation on non-violence leading to passivity was excellent. It was an honest approach to his own life: where he is, wants to be, and a thorough explanation of how although Christ taught non-violence, never did He teach passivity. More conversation needs to be had on the topic of laying down one’s own life, but overall it was a complete discourse. Finally, Boyd discusses the idea that the oppressed are better off after the oppressor has been disposed. For both the author and I, this is a difficult discussion, but one with modern applicable examples—Gandhi and M. L. King—that shed light on the right way to function.

This book was straightforward and easy to read, capturing my attention from the very onset and never letting go. It was consistently poignant, thought provoking, and at times enraging, while remaining encouraging and hope inspiring.

For Pentecostals and Charismatics the book is especially enjoyable, as Boyd’s Pentecostal background comes through in his writing, establishing an identification that was disarming. The themes of this book will undoubtedly challenge most American Christians as they attempt to deconstruct much if not all we have been taught about our history and role in society from an early age. Boyd teaches us a way that is painful and uncomfortable—a way of the gospel, transformed lives, and submission to others. This work will call all readers to some level of repentance and point them, whether they choose to walk it or not, toward a better way of the cross.