

Fatal Attraction

There is so much we take for granted in America. This weekend, we will remember those who gave their lives for the principles of freedom, a fair and representative government. Hopefully, we will also take time to thank God for his role in our independence as a people and nation. There are those who argue that God only messes up things and creates war; it is never our fault as humans when things go wrong; it must be God's fault. But nothing could be further from the truth. At the center of our freedoms is God's grace - something worth dying for. God's son was willing to die for it, and so should we.

Grace gives us a second chance; it presumes innocence until proven guilty. Grace demands that no one be given too much authority - that all are born equal in God's eyes. Grace gives us freedom until we abuse it. Grace is born from love, and God is love. Grace demands intimacy, honesty and truthfulness. Grace requires nothing in return, but delights in gratitude, humility, honesty and hard work. Grace is the ultimate source of freedom; but freedom will eventually evaporate if God's grace is ignored. If America ever goes down a road of restricting or not appreciating religious freedom; or if the American Church ever loses its zeal for the Lord or passion for its special role in our society, we will lose everything, including the freedoms for which so many people have given their lives.

Look carefully; you will discover many bright lights emerging throughout the world, especially in the Middle East. Some governments are inching closer to giving its citizens new freedoms. But, of course, others are going the opposite direction, creating even harsher rules, causing quiet desperation and hopelessness for its citizenry. It is a mixed bag on the Arabian Peninsula. Some countries on the Peninsula are beginning to allow greater freedoms, while others are tossing about wildly, often reverting to more strict and cruel authority.

One country attempting greater political freedom is the United Arab Emirates. The UAE is actively courting the Western world and its business interests. If it allows even slightly greater freedom in its society, the UAE stands to gain increased trust from the West. And, for this reason, both the aboveground Church and the underground Church in the UAE are growing at a rapid rate. For whatever reason, the UAE government often turns a blind eye to the growth of the Church in its country.

As most of you know, I have led two groups of American Church leaders to the UAE in the last year-and-a-half. It is a most fascinating country. Only about 20 percent of the country's population comprises the actual Emiratis; the rest of the population

is allowed to live in the country for up to 5 years as expatriot workers. Most Emiratis are connected in one way or the other to either the ruling monarchy or to the country's incredible wealth. As a result, it is very difficult to meet or establish a relationship with an Emirati under these circumstances. Although most tend to live in guarded houses behind tall walls, there is a flood of new Christian workers from around the world trying to penetrate those barriers. Through innovative and creative means, some are beginning to establish meaningful relationships with the upper echelons of UAE society.



New building being built in the UAE

What Christian workers are discovering behind these tall walls of incredible wealth is mind-blowing. Many children in these wealthy families are desperate for attention and love. They have distant and unattached relationships with their parents. Some junior- or senior-high aged children even have their own houses, living separately from their parents. Many of the children are closer emotionally to their maids, teachers, butlers, drivers and servants than they are to their parents. They have never heard that God is love. In Islam, God has 99 attributes, but not one of them is love. The concept of grace is completely foreign to them. Islam is a religion of law, not grace.



Gold and jewel plated cars

Christian workers in the UAE have told me many of these wealthy children of the monarchs are severely undereducated, and also underdeveloped emotionally. Many 25-year-old Emiratis barely possess the equivalent of a high school education. Because they will inherit so much money from their parents, why go to college or get an education at all?

A very good friend of mine, Swailem Hennein, was a professor of public health at the University of Illinois until he retired nearly 20 years ago. Swailem is an Egyptian-American. He was raised in Egypt and served as a Presbyterian missionary in the Sudan and Kenya for years. I once asked Swailem what was the biggest societal challenge facing Egypt and other countries in the Middle East today? His answer surprised me. "Fatalism," he said. He explained Islam teaches that nothing in the world happens apart from God's will, power and sovereignty. For Muslims, humans have a minimal role to play in what happens each day. This is the reason Muslims often close a conversation saying, "If God wills." Yet, such a view of God can easily lead to fatalism, which can sap the Muslim of individual initiative if he or she is not careful. Remember, they are taught God is distant from the Muslim. He is

someone to revere and fear. Intimacy or friendship with God is an anathema to a Muslim. God is to be obeyed, not intimately loved.

For this reason, many parents in the UAE and in other Muslim countries keep their children at a distance, since God is keeping them at a distance. Children are expected to revere and obey their parents, being careful not to get too close to them. But now, a lot is beginning to change on the Arabian Peninsula. With lower oil prices, the Saudi Arabian monarchy has recently announced it will most likely begin cutting back or altogether eliminating the monthly check or "allowance" it gives each one of its citizens. Saudi Arabians are being warned they might be required to work harder and more in the future. As a result, Saudi Arabia and other Middle Eastern governments contemplating their own futures, are beginning to study western-styled business practices of entrepreneurship and individual enterprise.

At the heart of America's beginning years lies a strong Protestant work ethic. While Catholics also played an equally important role, Protestants were most vocal and influential in articulating a human's responsibility in relating to God and improving society. Moral thinkers such as John Bunyan, John Locke and Adam Smith, fueled the value of individual initiative and enterprise. Yes, Christians have their own temptations in regard to human beings becoming too passive in their relationship with God; they can easily develop an unbalanced view of predestination, chosenness and election. However, at the heart of the Gospel is a demand for individual decision, responsibility, stewardship and hard work. Christians work hard because they are motivated by love and gratitude, not obligation.



John Bunyan

You see, what Jesus Christ did for us on the cross is something we could not do on our own. He paid the penalty for human sin, on our behalf. Throughout history, humans have repeatedly demonstrated how incapable we are at pleasing God on our own - by being obedient to his rules and regulations by means of our own efforts. We needed a savior, and God sent his son to rectify the intractable situation for us. But Christ also tore down the curtain that had previously separated us in the most Holy of Holy places within the Jewish temple so that we could walk directly into the presence of God by means of his Holy Spirit. Because of Christ, we can now be close and intimate with God.



Listen to the words of the book of Hebrews; "But when Christ came as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation), he entered once and for all into the Holy Place, not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption. For if the blood of goats and bulls, with the sprinkling of the ashes of a heifer, sanctifies those who have been defiled so that their flesh is purified, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to worship the living God!" (Hebrews 9:11-14)

Christianity is not just any old religion. It is the true religion that gave birth to the greatest form of government the world has ever known. It is the story behind the story of Memorial Day. We can never be free on our own, no matter how sound our government blue print may be. An active Church is essential for keeping a people free. A religion that prescribes and promotes intimacy and love with the Creator will give us a joy our hearts can barely contain. And, it will give us all the strength, resolve and hope we need for a good day's work.

Happy Memorial Day and may God bless you in your freedom.