

December 25, 2011

Christmas Day

On this Christmas day we send our greetings to all of our friends and fellow believers in celebration of the day our savior, Christ Jesus our Lord was born. There is no better section of scripture that encapsulates the joyous Christmas message of what actually happened in the reality of historical time and its meaning for Christians for all time than Galatians 4:4-7. I present it below in a range of beautiful translations:

"But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, 5 to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. 6 And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!' 7 So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God." (ESV)

"But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, 5 to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship. 6 Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father." 7 So you are no longer a slave, but God's child; and since you are his child, God has made you also an heir." (NIV)

"But when the right time came, God sent his Son, born of a woman, subject to the law. 5 God sent him to buy freedom for us who were slaves to the law, so that he could adopt us as his very own children. 6 And because we are his children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, prompting us to call out, "Abba, Father." 7 Now you are no longer a slave but God's own child. And since you are his child, God has made you his heir." (NLT)

May God bless you all as we celebrate the reality and meaning of Christ's life each and every day that we live!

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October 30, 2011

Reformation Sunday

In much of the Protestant world of Christianity the last Sunday of October is designated as Reformation Sunday in remembrance of the momentous events that began in the fall of 1517 when Martin Luther courageously took a stand against the widespread corruption in doctrine and practice that was current in the Roman Catholic Church of his day. Having grown up in the Protestant faith this day has a great deal of meaning for me. Though my own particular childhood church tended to pay less and less attention to its significance as I grew up through my teenage years, that church was originally founded on Reformation principles and they were ingrained in me through our church services, Sunday school

classes, special events, and most importantly, my own personal study of the scriptures which both my parents and ministers encouraged me to pursue.

This personal study of the scriptures - a legacy of the Reformation - has been a life-long joy for me and it began as far back as I can remember. I cannot remember any time in my life that I did not believe the Bible to be the most special of all books; that is, the one book - far above all others - that was uniquely "inspired by God" and that contained God's words for life. In my earliest days I began with the King James Version (KJV) and the Revised Standard Version (RSV) which remain today as two pillars of English translations of the Bible. However, over the past fifty years many other translations or revisions of the Bible in English have appeared which are both more accurate and more readable than either of these two venerable versions. Though I use and recommend a wide range of versions, there are three in particular that I use most often and that I primarily recommend to others for one's own personal reading, study, and memorization. These span the translation spectrum from essentially literal (ESV) to balanced (NIV) to more free (NLT) and are all the product of some of the best Bible translation scholarship in the world today:

1. The English Standard Version (ESV):

2. The New International Version (NIV):

3. The New Living Translation (NLT):

I hope that each reader of this web-site will check out and read up on these excellent translations or versions of the Bible by consulting their web-sites. Take the time to get to know them well. Each of these popular translations ultimately owes its existence to the Reformation which sparked what is now a five hundred year quest for biblical understanding and a parallel quest for communicating that understanding to the common man through translations and various forms of commentary. Though each of these versions of the Bible can be used very well as one's primary Bible for personal reading, study, and memorization, they are also very useful for comparative study of particular biblical passages. Therefore I recommend that a person own a good copy of each of them at least for comparative purposes. In addition, each of these versions can also be used in a very clear and useful Study Bible format in which a huge amount of valuable historical, cultural, literary, and linguistic information can be accessed at one's fingertips. Yes, it takes some time and effort to master the formats of these Study Bibles; however, it is time that is very well spent and can yield a great deal useful understanding.

In sum, when each of the above versions of the Bible is used and understood in the light of its own translation philosophy - literal, balanced, free - the biblical text and meaning is normally clear for those who truly want to see and understand it. The Study Bible format can enhance this understanding as well by providing more background information. This is all a huge and priceless legacy of the Reformation and those of us who are heirs of it have a corresponding responsibility to take advantage of these and similar resources so that the light of the truth of God's word can shine forth to modern hearers of its message today.

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August 29, 2011

Summer Travels and Thoughts

This summer my wife Dorota and I visited Europe together and saw several different countries, cities and regions over the space of about three weeks. There were many great experiences on this trip but the highlight, aside from simply spending time together with Dorota, was certainly spending about 10 days in Poland visiting her family and then being able to fellowship with our dear brothers and sisters in Christ both in Krakow and in our annual summer Bible conference in the Polish mountains. It was an especially eventful time for me, not only because of the wonderful fellowship and events of this summer, but also because it was the 30th anniversary of when I first visited Europe during the summer of 1981.

That first six-week trip, consisting primarily of travel through the Soviet Bloc of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union itself, set me on a new course in my life that has influenced almost everything that I've done since that time. At the time I was 26 years old, had already worked many different jobs, lived in many different places, and seen about half of the states of the United States. This was mostly a result of being very involved in helping plant, build and lead home Bible fellowships for the previous eight years since graduating from high school. Fortunately, by this time I had also somehow managed to gain a college education in history and political science from North Carolina State University and I was contemplating a career in Soviet and East European Studies which had been my specialty at NCSU - thanks to several outstanding professors who had inspired me. I decided that the best way to gauge my real interest in this field was to visit these countries and see them for myself. Equally, I also had a desire to help people in those countries to come to better know God and to live for him through gaining a more accurate knowledge of God's word from the Bible. From the very beginning I believed that if I could help just one person in this regard then it would be worth all of the time, expense and effort involved.

And so on July 1, 1981 - with the backing and prayers of many others - I set out for West Berlin, Germany and continued through the next six weeks over the Berlin Wall to East Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Austria, Hungary, Yugoslavia, Romania, and then to the Soviet republics of Moldavia, Ukraine, Byelorussia, Lithuania, Latvia, and the Russian Republic. Given my background I was probably about as prepared as anyone could be for such a trip; however, given the difference between the communist world of the East and the free, democratic world of the West at the time nothing could really have prepared me adequately for what I was to experience. It was the hardest thing that I had ever done up until that time and when I finished I never wanted to return to that region of the world again. The communist oppression, lack of freedom, economic hardship and sheer difficulty of life was far greater than anything I had seen to that point in my life. And, it did not help that I got sick twice along the way including having mononucleosis for the last two and half weeks in the Soviet Union. However, I also believed that I was there for a purpose and that God was guiding me along the way. The people I

met, the experiences that took place, and the undeniable working of God - in me, through me and despite me - made vivid impressions on my mind and heart. And so, after recovering from mononucleosis after returning to America I was ready to go back again.

That opportunity came about through a summer school program in Krakow, Poland in the summer of 1982. It was here that I met two people - a teacher of Russian and a teacher of English who were also leaders in the summer school program - Leszek and Olga Druszkiewicz. We developed a close friendship and began to study the Bible together; and, from that point we also began to gradually build a Bible fellowship that has continued under their leadership until this day. Nobody could have better friends as brothers and sisters in Christ than these two dear individuals who have done so much to help so many others since that time. Thankfully, over the next five years I was able to live, study and work in Krakow and to experience some of the greatest years of my life and to meet what are today some of my dearest friends, family, and brothers and sisters in Christ. Most importantly, it was here that I met my dear wife and closest friend, Dorota. It would be impossible for me now to contemplate my life without her. Though our life together since that time has certainly not been easy - just as no believer's life is easy in the midst of this present evil age - it has nevertheless been filled with the joys of close companionship in living our daily lives and endeavoring to serve our God.

Thirty years is a long time but that first trip and the years that followed do not seem that long ago to me. I am thankful for each day along the way and for all the close friends, family and fellow believers that I've come to know and love during that time. I hope for much more to come in all respects. Unfortunately, reality has a way of breaking into the best of times and this past year I've personally seen the death of several Christian friends or relatives that have had an influence on my life including one of the smartest and wisest men I've ever known, Ferenc Jeszenszky, from Budapest, Hungary. Without that first trip thirty years ago I certainly never would have had the joy of knowing him and what a loss that would have been. He will always remain an example of godliness to me, Dorota, and all who knew him. And, as Olga Druszkiewicz reminded us at our Polish Bible conference this summer of 2011, such events should remind us both of the brevity of life and the necessity to make each day count in our life with God. And so with thankfulness for the past 30 years and with hope for our lives ahead I will close with the words of the Psalmist which he spoke to God,

"So teach us to number our days aright that we may gain a heart of wisdom." (Psalm 90:12)

May we make each day count for God's purposes as we live together for him.

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July 4, 2011

July 4th is Independence Day in the United States. It's a day in which the birthday of the United States is celebrated because it is the day in which the Declaration of Independence was approved and the US

officially declared its independence. I'm often asked questions about this by fellow Christians in relation to two points of interest and controversy. First, was the United States created as a nation "under God"? And, second, was/is the United States a Christian nation?

The answer to the first question is an unequivocal "yes". That is, the Declaration of Independence, America's founding document, is crystal clear that the United States was founded "under God." The answer to the second question is both "yes" and "no". That is, the vast majority of Americans at the time of America's founding as the United States were Christians of one sort or another with a common Christian ethic - despite differences on doctrinal details - which bound them together. Thus, the United States was a Christian nation in that the vast majority of its citizens were Christians. However, legally, the United States was not and is not a Christian nation. Instead, it has championed religious freedom from its very beginning, especially in the U.S. Constitution which sets forth the fundamental governmental structures and laws of the land. It is precisely because of this freedom that religion, and Christianity in particular in all of its different flavors, has flourished in the United States and continues to do so today.

The following is an article that I wrote some time ago which touches on both of these issues:

One Nation Under God?

I hope everyone has a wonderful 4th of July week!

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June 27, 2011

"Men of Truth"

Favorite Historical Individuals from the Renaissance to the Present

Each year as the school year comes to a close I have my European history students draw up a list of their favorite historical individuals in European history from c. 1500 to the present - that is, the period of time that we cover in our course. Sometimes I do this with my U.S. history students as well. The ground rules include that the individuals chosen must be people of some noted historical prominence and influence. Beyond that, it's up to each individual to choose his own. We then write them on the board with each listed in a column side by side with the others. Then each student explains his picks and, finally, at the end we compare the lists with one another and form a final consensus list. It is always an interesting and enjoyable time for us all. At the end I always add my own list as well which I fortunately have the opportunity to refine each year.

Of course, each list tells as much about the values and historical perspective of the person who makes it as it does of the significance of the individuals chosen. My list is no exception to this rule and it,

therefore, reflects my own Christian beliefs and values as well as my concern for the advancement of the knowledge of the truth. My list, which follows below, is actually a combined list - from any country - of my favorite historical individuals from the past 500 years or so, though it is necessarily, due to Europe's influential place in the world in this time period, dominated by Europeans. The list is presented chronologically rather than in order of importance. These were all people who were willing to take bold stands on behalf of the truth, usually at risk to their own lives. I hope you'll read up on them all and that it will spur your own appreciation of the thanks that are due to such men and women who stood for the truth.

1. Desiderius Erasmus (1466-1536)

The greatest man of his day and recognized as such during that time. A "Renaissance Man" in the best sense of that phrase. Erasmus was a biblical scholar, textual expert, writer, educator, diplomat and - most importantly - an earnest and devout Christian. Though he remained a member of the Roman Catholic Church throughout his life, he was a sharp and fearless critic of its structure, corruption and superstition. He believed in living as much as possible according to the simplicity of NT Christianity. As a scholar, his critical Greek text which he collated became the basis for Luther's translation of the NT into German and William Tyndale's translation of the NT into English. Though he was not willing to break with the Roman Catholic church as Luther did, his words and deeds provided the springboard from which Luther and the Reformation sprang full flame into history. Despite not breaking with the Roman Catholic church, Erasmus himself was often in peril due to his unwillingness to not speak the truth as he understood it and was often forced to seek refuge under the protection of others because of the shifting political alliances of his day.

2. Martin Luther (1483-1546)

The man who, through his courageous stand for the truth, changed the world. No one has affected the world of the last 500 years more than Martin Luther and no one has had more influence on the advancement of the truth than he. We are all his beneficiaries in countless ways - spiritually, politically, economically and socially. Luther's stand on the simple biblical truths of

1. justification and, thus, salvation solely by grace through faith in Christ,
2. the authority of the Bible in all matters of faith and practice, and,
3. the priesthood and equality of all believers before God

broke the institutional monopoly of the Roman Catholic church in 16th century life. From this a spiritual revolution sprang which begat a corresponding political, social and economic revolution. All of these revolutions continue to this day. Needless to say Luther was, for most of his life, a man whose life was in danger at nearly every moment due to his commitment to the truth.

3. William Tyndale (c. 1492-1536)

The true father of the English Bible who was also one of the greatest reformers of the Reformation. Though John Wycliffe had earlier in the 1300s translated the NT into English from Latin, Tyndale's translation of the NT from the Greek was much more accurate and it set the basis for almost all major versions and revisions of the Bible - including the KJV - up until 20th century. All English speaking Christians anywhere in the world are thus indebted to him. But so is Shakespeare and all of British and American language and literature up until the 20th century. In addition, his knowledge and understanding of the scriptures was perhaps the most accurate of all of the reformers. He lived constantly on the run and eventually paid for his commitment to the truth with his own life.

4. Hugo Grotius (1583-1645)

A devout reformed Christian, jurist, diplomat, educator and active participant in the church controversies of his own day. Grotius is often considered to be the father of international law. He wrote valuable works on Just War theory and the laws of war, seeking to bring about a more just society during a time of much European conflict, often revolving around religious controversies. His expertise and wisdom were internationally recognized much in the same way as Erasmus. However, due to his commitment to the truth as he understood it he was often on the run or in exile and served many different nations in diplomatic roles despite himself being Dutch.

5. Blaise Pascal (1623-1662)

A devout Christian, philosopher, mathematician and scientist. He was fully involved in the Scientific Revolution of his day but did not buy into many of the assumptions or conclusions of his scientific predecessors or contemporaries, in particular Descartes. Though he defended the scientific method, he did not believe that it, or empiricism, could be the only basis for understanding or discovering truth. He was a very independent thinker who was extremely concerned to understand truth in all its dimensions and refused to be limited by the religious or scientific "correctness" of his day. He was a Jansenist Roman Catholic Christian, which in essence means, a Roman Catholic who believed in a world created and governed by God, that man was sinful and in need of a savior, and that salvation was by grace through faith in Christ alone. The famous "Pascal's Wager" is the essence of common sense and just as true today as then.

6. King William (of Orange) (1650-1702)

The steadfast foe of the ambitions of Louis XIV, William of Orange first governed the Dutch Republic and then took the crown of England as King William III together with his wife Mary in the English Glorious Revolution of 1688-89. As a staunch protestant he defended and advanced the cause of freedom, rule of law, and biblical Christianity against the centralizing political absolutism and threatening Roman Catholicism of Louis the XIV and others of his day. All who read the Bible in their own vernacular and live in freedom under some system of constitutional rule of law are heirs and beneficiaries of his accomplishments.

7. John Locke (1632-1704)

One of the great men of Western Civilization. Locke was first and foremost a devout Christian who also became the father of modern empiricism and classical liberalism. His writings on natural rights, representative government, human understanding, and religious truth all were key elements in the British Enlightenment from which the European Enlightenment sprang. Though still revered today in many ways, the religious aspects of his thought and writings has almost been forgotten. This is unfortunate for it was actually his strong Christian faith that was the foundation of his own life and also, he believed, the most "reasonable" faith and world-view through which the God-given rights of man must be viewed.

8. John Wesley (1703-1791)

Wesley was a man who lived for God and the spread of God's word "in season and out of season." Though he insisted that he was Anglican throughout his life, he gave birth to the Methodist movement that reached the common man in both word and in deed. Wesley firmly believed in justification by faith - from an Arminian perspective - but coupled this with a strong emphasis on caring for the needs of God's people in the 18th century England where he lived. In fact, despite heavy criticism from traditional religious circles there was perhaps no man who did more for the people of England during the 18th century even though he had to work in non-conventional ways throughout most of his life. His life deserves to be appreciated first and foremost for his stand for the truth of God's word without which his actions on behalf of the social welfare of God's people would have been meaningless to him.

9. George Washington (1732-1799)

Washington was rightfully considered the greatest man of his day. Though modern scholars have tried to play down his Christian faith, they have not succeeded in doing so. Recent biographies and, most importantly, his own writings, clearly show his faith to have been central to his life, though in governmental affairs he promoted the freedom to exercise one's own religious belief in accordance with one's own conscience. In fact, he exemplified how a Christian man of strong faith could lead at the highest levels both in war and in government for the benefit of the common people of his day. He remains the paramount example of a military and political leader with integrity and dignity in pursuit of a righteous cause no matter the cost to himself. The political changes he helped to effect and the governmental structure that he helped to both shape and to put into action led to the establishment of a nation where political and religious freedom has flourished and where the free pursuit of the truth has been considered a natural right of all.

10. Winston Churchill (1874-1965)

Perhaps the greatest political leader of the 20th century. Churchill was a man who cherished freedom and was willing to give his all to preserve it. He was also a man who was willing - despite huge criticism - to see evil for what it really was in the form of both "Bolshevism" and "Nazism". Though he was ostracized for many years due to his convictions and his bold statements in the face of these evils, he was eventually called upon to lead Britain against all odds to victory in what he called its "finest hour". Every person who lives in freedom today is indebted to him for his stand against the enormous evils of his time.

Like all of us, all of the above individuals were flawed human beings. However, what separates them was their personal character in their willingness to overcome their weaknesses, their flaws, and their own ambitions to undertake the tasks that were necessary in their own generations despite the costs to their own lives. In one way or another they were all men of truth of whom we are all the beneficiaries of their efforts today. I hope those who read this blog will read up on each of them. If you do, be sure to put yourself in their shoes and to appreciate their lives in the midst of the realities of their own times. If you will do this you will gain a greater appreciation of some of the men who stood for the truth in their own days and, therefore, left us an example and a legacy to follow, enjoy and preserve.

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March 14, 2011

Understanding and Applying the Truth of the Bible

One of the most well known sections of scripture relating to the Bible's inspiration, authority and purpose is II Timothy 3:14-17:

"But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus."

"All Scripture is breathed out [inspired] by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work." (ESV).

When I was very young I accepted these words (originally read in the KJV) at their face value without any sophisticated theory of scriptural inspiration. Because of that I read, read and read the Bible with a reverence for the words that I was reading and with a humble receptivity that this was God's word to me and to my fellowman. This gave me a good overall scope of the Bible as a whole at a very young age. Over the years as I've continued to read and study the Bible I've come to a greater understanding of how the Bible originally came about and how to most properly read it and apply it to life in the light of its original historical context and its various literary forms and structures. However, this has only increased my appreciation and reverence for it. I've never ever felt the need to depart from the basic reverence with which I have always approached the Bible and the older I've become the more fully I appreciate the living truth of God's word that the Bible reveals in all its many ways. As someone who has studied and taught history for much of my life I can say that there is no other book in history that comes even remotely close to the Bible in the truth that it imparts. And, of course, this truth is as important, meaningful and relevant today as at any time in the history of the world.

This brings up the subject of how to understand and apply the truth of the Bible in a way that is both accurate and relevant to our lives today. Whenever, for example, I hear someone say, "Jesus said this" or "Jesus said that" my guard immediately goes up. I'm much more interested in knowing what Jesus said and meant in the light of the Bible as a whole rather than simply what "Jesus said." He himself appealed over and over again to the Old Testament and often his statements are taken to mean something that is at variance with what his closest followers including Paul, for instance, clearly said and meant. It is sometimes said for instance with regards to the subject of "non-resistance to evil" and "pacifism" that pacifists "appeal to Jesus" while those who don't believe that this point of view presents the whole picture "appeal to the Bible." I stand squarely in this latter category since the words and deeds of our Lord and Savior must themselves be understood both against the background of the Old Testament and in the light of how they should now be understood and applied in the new covenant era as explained in the Book of Acts and the NT Letters. Paul, for instance, is a much better guide for what Jesus meant than a post modern church pastor, a civil rights activist, or even a modern professor of NT studies who may not give us the full picture of what Jesus meant in the light of the new covenant perspective.

The Bible, of course, tells the story of God's relationship with man moving from "creation" in Genesis 1-2 in the Old Testament all the way to "new creation" in Revelation 21-22 in the New Testament. In between its books progressively unfold God's plan of salvation which he ultimately brings about through his Son, Jesus Christ. Christians should read and study the Bible in the light of this overall scope of the unfolding story of the Bible as a whole. They should gain a good knowledge of the Old Testament, read the Gospels in the light of the Old Testament, and then they should focus on that part of the Bible - The Book of Acts and the NT Letters - which specifically deals with the new covenant brought about by Christ's life, death, resurrection and the giving of the Spirit. All of this should then be understood in the light of Christ's future second coming and the final establishment of God's kingdom. To study any biblical topic in depth one should study it in the light of this progression of the unfolding of the biblical plan.

So, in sum, to best understand and apply the truth of the Bible to life:

1. Read and understand the Bible as an unfolding story from the Old Testament through the Gospels to the New Testament Letters culminating in the Book of Revelation.
2. Focus on the new covenant truth of being a child in God's family and a new creation "in Christ" as set forth in the Book of Acts and the New Testament Letters.
3. Then, as a Christian who is a new creation "in Christ" apply this truth to the situations of life in which you are involved by continuing to believe in Christ, and live a Christ-like life, until Christ's return!

As we do this we grow up into Christ in all things. But learning to do this is a lifetime growth and walk as a child in God's family. It takes time, effort, perseverance, and the concern to grow in understanding and applying the truth of the Bible in our lives.

Note: The "Bible Versions" section under "Recommendations" has recently been updated to reflect the recent updates in major Bible translations.

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Martin Luther King Jr. Day, January 17, 2011

Modern Conceptions of "Freedom," "Equality," and "Tolerance" in the Light of a Christian World-View

Today is Martin Luther King Jr. Day in the United States. It is a federal holiday in which we celebrate the life of a Christian man who, through dedication and the ultimate self-sacrifice, sought to bring about a society in which people are judged "by the content of their character rather than by the color of their skin." Having personally lived through the struggle this entailed in the American South, I consider Martin Luther King Jr. to be one of the greatest leaders in American history. In fact, as with other people, most Christians today welcome the political, legal, and religious freedoms, equality, and tolerance that now exist in much of the Western world. The benefits to individuals and to society as a whole that have come out of the historical processes that brought about these legal rights are obvious. Anyone who has ever lived under political tyranny certainly appreciates political freedom. Anyone who has ever lived under legal discrimination certainly welcomes legal equality. And, anyone who has ever been forced to accept certain religious, political, or scientific dogmas undoubtedly welcomes the freedom to seek out and determine the truth for himself in an atmosphere of tolerance. Nevertheless, we would almost all agree that for such ideals as freedom, equality, and tolerance to have any real useful, honorable, or practical meaning they must be specifically defined and qualified; otherwise, they become vague, mystical, open-ended, and even misleading concepts that often can do more harm than good.

It is ridiculous to simply be in favor of, or believe in, "freedom," "equality," or "tolerance" as though they have intrinsic value in and of themselves - apart from specific definitions and qualifications. No reasonable person would hold such an opinion. For example, though in general I am in favor of "freedom" of speech, my students in my history classes are by no means free to say anything they want, anytime they want, about any subject they want, or with any type of language that they choose to use. Instead, their freedom - of speech, in this case - is limited by their age, by the rules of the school, by the laws of the state, and by the direction of the adult teacher. To go a step further, it is obvious that very few people in our societies would support the "freedom" of individuals or groups of people to physically harm, steal from, or kill other people. Clearly, similar qualifications are necessary for the concepts of "equality," "tolerance," etc. as well if they are to have a useful meaning in society. So, when we speak of "freedom," etc. in Western societies we usually readily acknowledge that what we are in fact speaking of are freedoms that, though cherished, are also necessarily limited for the good of society as a whole. It then becomes a matter of determining the lines of demarcation for freedom in different spheres of life. Apart from that understanding the simplistic advocacy for "freedom," "equality," and "tolerance," etc. - as though these terms have a good and meaningful intrinsic value in and of themselves - has no reasonable or useful meaning in a civil society that is in any way devoted to the common or public good.

In addition, for a Christian it is always more important to do what is morally or ethically "right" irrespective of whether one has specific political, legal or religious "rights" in any given society. As a Christian my first responsibility is always to live in accordance with God's will irrespective of what kind of government I live under or irrespective of the freedoms that exist or don't exist in a given society. In short, a Christian is always responsible to do what is morally or ethically "right" in God's eyes irrespective of whether he has the legal "right" to do so or not and also irrespective whether he also has the legal "right" to do what is morally or ethically wrong. Nor does legal freedom, equality or tolerance equate to, or imply, something that is moral or ethical. No unethical or immoral thought, word or deed can be "baptized" or "cleansed" with modern conceptions of "rights" such as "freedom," "equality," or "tolerance" so as to make that thought, word or deed ethical or moral. Instead, a thought, word or deed is ethical or unethical, moral or immoral, based on its own intrinsic rightness or wrongness as determined by God alone.

Traditionally, in Western societies the standard for determining what is morally right and wrong in society has been the belief that man is created in the image of God and is thus responsible to live righteously before that righteous God to whom he must ultimately give account. On this basis it was long held to be true by almost all members of society that there are certain thoughts, words, and deeds that are intrinsically right or wrong - that is, absolute moral values that society should not allow, condone, or promote; otherwise, they would be to the detriment, and undermining, of the common good of society itself. In terms of concrete acts such as murder, theft, etc. many of these have always been rather easy to find a consensus on and to enforce in legal terms. Others - such as one's thought-life - are almost impossible to legalize against, or to enforce, and rarely has there been the desire or attempt to do so. Nevertheless, no one in society would have thought that every thought is therefore morally good simply because it was legally allowed or tolerated. In addition, through most of history no one in a Western society would have thought that the mere legal allowance or toleration of certain words or deeds made them moral. Instead, society as a whole continued to believe that there were certain moral absolutes of right and wrong - intrinsic to man's nature and responsibility before God - that did not change, irrespective of the legal status of certain words or deeds.

Over the last two hundred years or so this whole way of thinking has increasingly come under attack from many directions as God has been dethroned from his supreme position in Western societies and the secularization of society has progressed. Though the more traditional view of God-centered intrinsic values still exists amongst vast numbers of people, modern Western societies are now quickly moving more and more towards the relativistic rule of thumb that "anything is o.k. to believe and to do so long as it doesn't hurt someone else." Though this may very well be the best "ethic" that a modern, relativistic and secular society can come up with, it is certainly not a good enough standard for ethical or moral right and wrong for those who profess the Christian faith. Nor, is it necessary to simply let societies degenerate into such a mindless way of thinking without putting up resistance to such notions and without offering a better way forward. Biblically based Christians are obligated by their faith to recognize that there are certain beliefs, words, and deeds that are simply intrinsically wrong - and therefore are harmful to individuals and to society as a whole - irrespective of whether science, social science, law, or modern society at large recognizes that they are wrong or harmful. Therefore, though in

a secular society certain actions may be legally tolerated - or even promoted as "rights" or "freedoms" that offer a supposedly meaningful "diversity" in and of themselves - the Christian, to remain true to his faith, cannot in good conscience agree that these actions are "equally" good, moral, or even "o.k." - even if they are baptized and cleansed in the name of high sounding and modern secular conceptions of "freedom," "equality," "tolerance," or, increasingly, the catch-all ethic of "diversity." For the Christian, "good" is still good and "evil" is still evil irrespective of what modern ideals, slogans, or even science, may say. So, yes, I am personally very much in favor of political, legal, and religious freedom, equality, and tolerance. However, I am certainly not in favor of "freedom" without common sense limitations and qualifications; "equality" without obvious and necessary distinctions; or "tolerance" and "diversity" of evil, corruption, or immorality.

As a Christian minister, Martin Luther King Jr. would certainly have agreed with the above qualifications. His quest was not for "freedom," "equality," or "tolerance" per se; but rather for the freedom, equality, and tolerance that would enable a person to develop, and to be judged by, the content of his character as lived before God. To forget this is to forget who Martin Luther King Jr. was and what he and the Civil Rights movement in America actually stood for. Whenever a society loses the firm foundation by which it determines what is ethically right and wrong it cannot help but crumble from within. In Western societies that foundation has always begun with God and man's responsibility to him. It is not exclusive to Christianity but it certainly developed out of it. John Locke, the 17th century English Christian philosopher, who set out so beautifully the principles for representative democracy and natural rights given to man from God - upon which England, the United States, and other nations have rested - passionately believed that, " a society based on the consent of the members implied that each was a moral agent fully capable of understanding the moral postulates on which society rests." (The Reasonableness of Christianity p. X). For Locke, since each person was created in the image of God that person also had a natural capacity to recognize right from wrong. However, given that man was corrupted by sin, he also believed that the understanding of these "moral postulates" rested much more securely on a proper understanding and acceptance of the truths revealed in the Bible. Locke is also normally recognized as the father of both modern empiricism and also classical liberalism - two very modern concepts that have led to the development of both modern rights and modern science. Yet he believed that in matters of moral rights and wrongs only God's standards could be determinative. So what about today? If this traditional standard is done away with what standard can replace it? Can modern reason, or modern science, or modern social science, or a person's inner feelings, desires and passions now be the faithful guides to determine moral rights and wrongs rather than God? I will answer with a quote from another American Christian churchman, general, and statesman who recognized Locke's importance and has perhaps done more than anyone else in history to secure the political, legal and religious freedoms, equality, and tolerance we all now enjoy:

"Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports. In vain would that man claim the tribute of patriotism, who should labor to subvert these great pillars of human happiness, these firmest props of the duties of men and citizens. The mere politician, equally with the pious man, ought to respect and to cherish them. A volume could not trace all their connections with private and public felicity. Let it simply be asked: Where is the

security for property, for reputation, for life, if the sense of religious obligation desert the oaths which are the instruments of investigation in courts of justice ? And let us with caution indulge the supposition that morality can be maintained without religion. Whatever may be conceded to the influence of refined education on minds of peculiar structure, reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle." (George Washington, Farewell Address to the Nation, 1787).

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