

How might the Brethren pray for the nation?

Jay D Weaver, October 17, 2010

Prayer: God of Justice and Grace, we thank you for a land where we can exercise freedom of speech and religion. We thank you that our forefathers saw fit to separate the powers of the state from the institutions of religion. Most of all we thank you for times of peace in this land. We hope that indeed peace can replace war. When conflicts and differences arise, show us how to negotiate these issues without resorting to physical conflict.

We remember those men and women who died because nations found it necessary to use war to solve differences. Even more we remember the innocent who died in those conflicts. Many others have died in the pursuit of your Kingdom. We also remember them.

Bless our families. Too many have suffered violence and indignity at the hands of others in the family. Instead of showing love, they seek power and use violence just as nations do. How sad that so many children cannot be safe in their own homes. We remember those who died because of family violence.

Give America a vision of your Kingdom with a new commitment to peace and justice. As the prophet Amos said so long ago:

*Take away from me the noise of your songs;
I will not listen to the melody of your harps.
But let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*
Amen

As I see it, the question is not; *shall we pray for our nation?* It is *how should we pray for our nation?* This question is of particular concern for those people of faith who believe that their primary allegiance is to God and not to the state. We want to take a little time to explore our role as citizens of the Kingdom of God as it relates to our role as citizens of the United States of America.

Today (July 4, 2010) is the day when we annually celebrate the birth of our nation by the signing of the Declaration of Independence. It is appropriate that we examine this question on this very special day. However, I would like to look at the question from the perspective of the Church of the Brethren. Two years ago, in 2008 we celebrated the 300th anniversary of the beginning of our denomination. For the Brethren that was also a very special year.

Some Historical Background

When Alexander Mack and the other seven held their baptismal service at the Eder River in Schwarzenau, Germany in 1708, the memory of the Thirty Years War still had a strong influence on their views of their relationship to the state, and of the matter of war and peace. That war was the most destructive war that had ever been fought on European soil. It was fought mainly

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on what is now German soil, but also spread to other parts of Europe. Of course, Germany was not then a nation. It was simply a collection of small states. It is estimated that perhaps a third to half of the population of the Germanic states died due to the effects of that war. The war was fought mainly over religious issues, but as always, there were other political and economic concerns. The final peace was achieved with the signing of the treaty of Westphalia in the city of Muenster in 1648. That treaty in essence allowed the prince of each German state to determine which of the three major religions, the Catholic, Lutheran, or Reformed faith would be worshipped in that particular principality. Worshippers from other religious groups such as the German Baptist Brethren (now Church of the Brethren) and Mennonites were often arrested and put in prison or forced to move to another location. That eventually led to the decision of the early Brethren to migrate, first to Holland and eventually on to Pennsylvania, where William Penn had established a haven of religious liberty. Surely these events must have had a lot of influence on the early Brethren as they developed their views on the *separation of church and state*, on *pacifism*, and in particular the doctrine of *no force in matters of faith*.



The Futility of War; from the room where the Treaty of Westphalia was signed.

One of the signers of the Declaration of Independence was Benjamin Rush. He was considered to be one of the most important persons among the founding fathers of our nation, along with George Washington, and Benjamin Franklin. A prolific writer, he wrote many essays including one entitled "Account of the Manners, of the German Inhabitants of Pennsylvania." He concluded that essay with the following statement:

Perhaps those German sects of Christians among us, who refuse to bear arms for the purpose of shedding human blood, may be preserved by divine providence, as the center of a circle, which shall gradually embrace all nations of the earth in a perpetual treaty of friendship and peace.

Those German sects included the Amish, the Mennonites and the German Baptist Brethren. We might also include the Quakers, although they were not of German origin, but from England. Amongst these German Inhabitants of Pennsylvania, there were and are differences among the various sects. As time went on, those differences became more apparent.

The Amish and Mennonites follow a doctrine known as *non-resistance*, based on the biblical injunctions to "resist not evil," "turn the other cheek," "love your enemy," etc. That doctrine was followed so strictly that most members did not even vote. The idea was that they should have no part in political life. My father, a Mennonite, never voted in his life, yet he held strong views on political issues. Even though he never registered to vote, he considered himself to be a Republican. However, he was also an admirer of Robert Kennedy. Maybe that's why four of his children eventually registered as Democrats and two as Republicans.

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The early Brethren also followed the doctrine of non-resistance and were not allowed to vote, but as time went on, they moved away from that strong a position. Carl F. Bowman in his definitive work entitled *Brethren Society* shows very clearly that it was the temperance issue that brought the matter of voting to a head for the Brethren. The question of voting was debated at the 1912 Annual Meeting. After presenting some of the speeches in his book, Bowman states the following:

These remarks make clear the moral chasm between Dunker traditionalists and the proponents of temperance politics. The former sought to cleanse the *church* and the hearts of its adherents, while the latter sought any means at their disposal to cleanse the *world*.ⁱ

You might recall that in 1915 Martin Grove Brumbaugh—a *Brethren* minister and historian became *Governor of Pennsylvania*. During World War I, Brumbaugh called up the state militia and serve as its nominal commander. That did not sit well with many of the Brethren who still followed seriously the doctrine of non-resistance.

During the period between the World War I and World War II, the Brethren moved away from the doctrine of non-resistance to more of a pacifist position. They more actively involved themselves in pushing peace issues politically. However when a draft became imminent at the beginning of World War II, Mennonites such as Orie Miller and Brethren such as M. R. Zigler joined forces and met with General Hershey to set up a system of service known as Civilian Public Service so that conscientious objectors could avoid military conscription.

During and after World War II, many of the Amish and the Old Order Mennonites refused to register for the draft. The Lancaster newspapers often carried articles about those who were sent to prison for not registering for the draft. As to the draft itself, most of them were farmers and hence, those who did register got farm deferments. For the Mennonites in the Lancaster Conference, cooperation with the selective service was encouraged. Most young men registered, but service in the armed forces, whether combatant or non-combatant, was a test of membership. Young men were ex-communicated for wearing the uniform.

For the Brethren with their *no force in matters of faith* policy, the decision was left to the individual conscience. Some young men served as objectors and some served in the armed forces of the United States in either combatant or non-combatant roles. All were eventually welcomed back into the church after their time of service was concluded.

What does the New Testament tell us about our role as citizens of the state?

Let's begin with a few scriptures that speak to the Christian's relationship to the secular state. First, let's look at something Jesus said when questioned by the religious authorities. Then we will look at Paul's ideas and finally the writings of John, the Revelator.

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The Question about Paying Taxes

Mark 12:13-17 Then they sent to him some Pharisees and some Herodians to trap him in what he said. And they came and said to him, "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality, but teach the way of God in accordance with truth. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?

Should we pay them, or should we not?" But knowing their hypocrisy, he said to them, "Why are you putting me to the test? Bring me a denarius and let me see it." And they brought one. Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" They answered, "The emperor's." Jesus said to them, "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." And they were utterly amazed at him.

The question was meant to trap Jesus. If he answered "no" to the question of paying taxes to Rome, he could have been charged for sedition by the Roman authorities. If he answered "yes," the crowd who hated Rome would have turned against him. However, Jesus turned the tables on his challengers. He asked to see a denarius. There were two types of coins in those days. The one used by Jews had no graven image on it. The Roman denarius, used to pay taxes to the empire, had the head and inscription of the emperor. The instant they showed Jesus the coin, they were trapped. It was against Jewish law to have that coin in the temple. It had a graven image which violated the second commandment. They should not have had the coin. The counter-trap set by Jesus was brilliant.

Now, as to Jesus' verbal response, in the first half he is simply saying that it is the emperor's coin, give it back to him. This was by no means an endorsement of political loyalty to Caesar. If he had meant that, he would have simply said, "yes" to their question. As to the second part, it was understood by the Jews that everything belonged to God: *Psalm 24:1 The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof*. In the end, everything belonged to God and nothing belonged to Caesar.

Being Subject to Authorities

Now let's look at a well-known passage from Paul's letter to the Romans. This passage immediately follows Romans 12 which includes an oft-quoted verse in both the Mennonite and Brethren churches, namely Romans 12:2 *Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect*. Chapter 12 also concludes with the statement: Romans 12:20: *If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good*. The Roman Empire and as a matter of fact, no nation operates that way. Keep this in mind as we look at Romans 13.

Romans 13:1-7 Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur

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judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you wish to have no fear of the authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval; for it is God's servant for your good. But if you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the sword in vain! It is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be subject, not only because of wrath but also because of conscience. For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, busy with this very thing. Pay to all what is due them—taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due.

Here the apostle Paul describes the role and vocation of government; in addition to the church, government also plays a role in God's plan and purposes. Preserving the social order, punishing evil and rewarding good, and protecting the common good are all prescribed; we are even instructed to pay taxes for those purposes! Tea-partiers might take note. It is obvious that Paul was speaking about government as it was ordained by God. He was not endorsing blind obedience to a government that was running counter to the will of God. He well knew the cruelty and evil which were part and parcel of the Roman Empire. After all the empire had imprisoned him and even more importantly, had crucified his Lord.

The Empire, the First Beast

Now let's look at what John the Revelator had to say about the Roman Empire and its persecution of the Christians of his day by the emperor Domitian.

Rev. 12:13 – 13:10 Then the dragon took his stand on the sand of the seashore. And I saw a beast rising out of the sea, having ten horns and seven heads; and on its horns were ten diadems, and on its heads were blasphemous names.

And the beast that I saw was like a leopard, its feet were like a bear's, and its mouth was like a lion's mouth. And the dragon gave it his power and his throne and great authority. One of its heads seemed to have received a death-blow, but its mortal wound had been healed. In amazement the whole earth followed the beast. They worshiped the dragon, for he had given his authority to the beast, and they worshiped the beast, saying, "Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?"

The beast was given a mouth uttering haughty and blasphemous words, and it was allowed to exercise authority for forty-two months. It opened its mouth to utter blasphemies against God, blaspheming his name and his dwelling, that is, those who dwell in heaven. Also it was allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them. It was given authority over every tribe and people and language and nation, and all the inhabitants of the earth will worship it, everyone whose name has not been written from the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb that was slaughtered.

Let anyone who has an ear listen:

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*If you are to be taken captive,
into captivity you go;
if you kill with the sword,
with the sword you must be killed.*

Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints.

The beast is an obvious metaphor for the Roman Empire. For example, the seven heads could well represent the Seven Hills of Rome. The ten horns would probably represent the Decapolis, the ten important cities in the Roman Empire. There is reference to the fact that Rome ruled the entire then-known world. The emperor was worshipped as a God. In fact, the official slogan of the empire was that *Caesar is Lord*. However, the Christians refused to make that proclamation. They proclaimed: *Jesus is Lord*, and underwent severe persecution because of it. It is interesting that the Revelator does not recommend violent rebellion. As a matter of fact, the poem at the end of this description of the beast recommends just the opposite. To me this passage says that non-violent civil disobedience is entirely proper. However, you must be prepared to pay the consequences for your action.

Some quotes from various sources:

*Celeste Kennel-Shank in Sojourners*ⁱⁱ

After describing a “presentation of the colors” ceremony which took place in a worship service complete with flags and rifles, she tells of her discomfort with the setting. I quote from her article:

In a nation where many gods vie for our allegiance, we should be clear about which one we serve. During Communion, often in the front of a sanctuary, we remember a Christ who allowed his body to be broken and blood to be shed rather than raise arms against his enemies. To exalt a national symbol in that same space is to challenge the lordship of Christ.

*Susan Boyer (pastor of the Laverne (Ca.) COB) in Messenger*ⁱⁱⁱ

Susan’s attendance at a 4th of July Los Angeles Angels game, complete with fireworks and ceremonies, prompted her to write an article for Messenger about how Brethren might relate to their nation. Near the end of the article she says the following:

I am afraid that too many Brethren today have fallen into a national religion that our denomination was born rejecting. Too many Brethren pledge their allegiance to the state. Then there are those Brethren who are trying to baptize the empire. But I think the largest group of Brethren are those who, while not becoming nationalistic, have used the Brethren understanding of the separation of church and state as a nice, cozy hiding place. Not giving themselves wholly to the state, they also do not give themselves to God.

Jim Wallis in his book, “The Call to Conversion”^{iv}

In his discussion of the role that prayer can play in our search for peace in the Kingdom of God, Wallis says:

Historically, prayer and worship have always been at the heart of the most powerful expressions of

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Christian witness against tyranny and violence. Prayer, while offered for the sake of the world, will change those who pray. Motivated by a great evil in the world, prayer first raises the question of our own complicity in evil. Prayer humbles us. It starts in confession and repentance and recalls our identity as God's people. To pray is to recognize that, before the evil can be overcome, we must be transformed.— Thus prayer and the results of prayer are the most revolutionary of acts. The powers and principalities of this world are aware of this; that is why they consider those who pray in this way to be a threat.

Vernard Eller in his book "The Promise: Ethics in the Kingdom of God"^v

In his first chapter, Eller introduces what he calls the Ethic of Promise (or of the Kingdom). At one point he talks about the tension-producing aspect of this ethic. The Ethics of Promise causes decisions to be made on the basis of what best furthers the Kingdom of God rather than the present kingdoms of this world. To save space, I extracted the following from his

To have one segment of society, the Christian minority, pushing ahead toward its absolutist, perfectionist goal will not sit too well with the majority whose only interest is to accommodate to the world as it is.—If for example, those who accept the promise of the peaceable kingdom were to decide that they no longer *have* to let themselves be sucked into the world's violent ways.

This ethic would produce not simply tension but trauma.—There is a trauma of birth as well as of death; the ethic of promise can be expected to bring on the birth pangs of the kingdom. Its proponents will make no claim that its methods will "work" in the present or "succeed" in the sense that today's world understands success. It does claim to be the only way of getting the present translated into the glorious future that God has prepared for it.

Some questions for discussion:

1. Have we as Brethren lived up to Rush's vision of our potential?
2. Has that circle grown or has it shrunk?
3. Do you as an individual accept Rush's role for the Church of the Brethren? Why or why not? How do we Manage Joint Citizenship in the Kingdom of God and in the Secular State?

How do we as Brethren pray for the nation?

We can probably all agree on some things and will probably disagree on others. Let's look again at the prayer in our opening devotional. Some Further Questions for discussion

1. Should we pray for the preservation of our nation? (If so, by what means?)
2. If we are at war, should we pray for victory over another nation or peoples?
3. Should we pray for the enemy? (If so, in what way?)
4. Should we pray for any people who are being oppressed by our nation?
5. Should we pray for those who are supporting the war effort and/or serving in the armed forces? (In what way?)
6. Should we pray for those who refuse to participate because of conscience?
7. Should we pray for wisdom and guidance to be given to our leaders?
8. Should I pray that I may remain faithful to my (God, Country, or both)?

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9. To whom should I remain faithful if there is a conflict in loyalty?
10. Finally, are we called to be successful or to remain faithful?

ⁱ Bowman, Carl F. *Brethren Society*: The John Hopkins University Press, 1995, p. 225

ⁱⁱ Kennel-Shank, Celeste "No Other Gods" from *Sojourners Magazine*, August, 2010, p10

ⁱⁱⁱ Boyer, Susan "Being Brethren on the 4th of July" *Messenger*, July/August, 2010, p13

^{iv} Wallis, Jim *The Call to Conversion*: HarperSanFrancisco, 1981, rev 2005, p102

^v Eller, Vernard *The Promise: Ethics in the Kingdom of God*: Doubleday & Co, Inc. 1970

All scripture texts are quoted from the New Revised Standard Version