

## Addressing the Challenge of America's 'Civil' Religion

Whether we recognize it or not, we have grown up in a society which has taught us certain values which we do not even recognize, yet hold as proper and true.

Some of those values have a place in our lives and serve to promote civic good. Yet, some of those values are misleading, and confound our worship and service of the **One Triune God** who calls us to the salvation he has secured for us in his **Son** and would convey to us and transform us by through the work of his **Holy Spirit**.

America's Civil Religion is one of the principles we have been exposed to which has taught us values which fall within this realm.

(For a more thorough discussion of this topic please refer as I have in this article, to "The Challenges of American Civil Religion for the Church" by David L. Adams which is found in *Witness and Worship in Pluralistic America*, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri.)

'The term 'civil religion' occurs for the first time in Book 4, Chapter 8 of Rousseau's *The Social Contract* (1762).' [Jean Jacques Rousseau was a French political philosopher who lived between 1712-1778].

A 'civil religion' is a religious ideology that is both shaped by and helps to shape the collective consciousness of a culture.

As Rousseau defined it, a 'civil religion' has the following principles or dogmas: 1) the existence of a powerful, wise, and benevolent Divinity, who foresees and provides for the life to come; 2) the happiness of the just; 3) the punishment of the wicked; 4) the sanctity of the social contract and the laws; and 5) a **thorough condemnation of intolerance**.

To these dogmas (which we can readily see promoted by our society-state) there are some unique American additions: 6) the notion of America's manifest destiny (America is the 'new Israel' chosen by God); and 7) the anonymity of God (**God has no particular name, but is just know generically as god**).

In Rousseau's thinking such a 'civil religion' would **serve the interest of the state** by a) providing legitimacy to the state and its laws; b) encourage citizens to perform their duties rather than seek their own individual will; c) preserve moral order (discourage wickedness and lawlessness while **encouraging civil righteousness** <good works>).

'Civil' religion serves the benefits of citizens of the state in a temporal sense, it falls severely short of being adequate in a spiritual sense.

As Paul Speratus so ably writes in the hymn *Salvation unto Us has Come* [TLH 377] vs 1, "Salvation unto us has come By God's free grace and favor; Good works can not avert our doom, They help and save us never, Faith looks to Jesus Christ alone, Who did for all the world atone; He is our **One Redeemer**."

Speratus is not speaking of just any word about any god dreamed up by man. Speratus is speaking of the One Triune God who reveals and conveys himself and his saving grace only in his Son Jesus Christ, through the presence and work of the Holy Spirit in God's Word and Sacrament.

Regardless of how 'intolerant' it may appear to be, and how 'in the face' of 'civil' religion it may be, to speak solely of this One True God, verses the generic gods of society... the One True Triune God is the One True God of salvation. As Peter writes in Acts 4:12 "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved."

It is also a clear misplacement of priorities and an illusion to think that the membership in the kingdom of the left (the state) is more important than membership in the kingdom of the right (the church).

Properly speaking the church is true believers in Jesus Christ. (Those who acknowledge and confess their sins and look in faith to the forgiveness God provides in Jesus Christ).

It is citizenship in this church (kingdom) which is of paramount importance. For this kingdom, this church, is in face to face communion with the One True God... receives his gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation... and will reign with him in eternity. It is citizenship there in a "city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God" [Heb 11:10] that we look to "longing for a better country-a heavenly one" [Heb 11:16]

Our true and faithful witness to the One True God is critical for those who know of no other faith than that promoted by our society.

We hold to that saving faith, and we bear witness to it for the glory of the One God who created us, redeemed us, and now sanctifies us as he reaches out through us to direct others to his saving grace in Jesus Christ our Lord.

While such a definition and application of a