

“Using God”

It has been said that pride is the oldest sin in the universe and that it shows no signs of growing weaker with age. Pride is the overestimation of our own worth and the inevitable tendency to exaggerate our own accomplishments. If the Bible is clear about anything, it is that ours is a fallen race and that human pride is the inevitable consequence of the fall. God warned the people of Israel to exercise great care in this regard, “lest you forget the LORD your God by not keeping his commandments and his rules and his statutes, which I command you today, lest, when you have eaten and are full and have built good houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks multiply and your silver and gold is multiplied and all that you have is multiplied, then your heart be lifted up, and you forget the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery . . . Beware lest you say in your heart, ‘My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth.’” In Romans 1:22, Paul speaks of human pride in these terms; “Claiming to be wise, they became fools.” Because of sin, we suppress the fact that God is the source of all that we have. We see ourselves as far more important than we are. We act as though all of life rises and sets upon our own shadow. Therefore, we are constantly tempted to use God to suit our own sinful ends.

Perhaps it might help to frame the matter like this. When we become great in our own eyes, our estimation of God and his purposes is necessarily diminished. Like two people sitting on opposite ends of a playground teeter-totter, when the person sitting on one end goes up, the other person goes down. The same applies to our estimation of God. When our own desires and whims are elevated over God and his glory—the very essence of sinful pride—God is necessarily diminished in our estimation. When this happens, our own skewed self-estimation replaces the uncomfortable truth we seek to evade—that God is great and we are not.

A great God makes proud sinners uncomfortable, a diminished God less so. Given our sinful proclivity to exalt ourselves, the diminished God can easily become a means to an end. While such a God is still much bigger and more powerful than we are, nevertheless the smaller we make him, the greater the opportunity to manipulate his power to further our sinful ends. Unlike the God of the Bible, who has decreed whatsoever comes to pass (Ephesians 1:11) and who does whatever pleases him (Psalm 115:3), the diminished God exists to do whatever pleases us. On call 24/7, he is there to attend to our all whims and respond to our constant whining. This God is not to be served and adored, rather, he is a means to an end. Like the genie freed from his bottle, this God is there to answer our prayers and give us what we wish.

Sometimes we use God quite intentionally, other times we do it without even knowing it. The bottom line is that we use God to suit our own ends because we live our lives through the distorted lens of human pride. Inevitably, we see our own interests and agendas as far more important than they really are. From this distorted perspective God exists to enable us to achieve that which we have decreed, that which pleases us—the complete reversal of the two biblical passages just cited. This, of course, is the height of human folly and the sad consequence of

sinful pride.

Some of the ways in which we use God are much more obvious than others. Several instances of this sinful tendency can be found within the pages of the New Testament. In the opening chapters of Mark's Gospel, Mark recounts for us the early days of Jesus' messianic mission around Capernaum. When Jesus cast out demons and healed the sick, it was not long before word spread throughout the Galilee that a healer/exorcist extra-ordinaire was in their midst. Soon, Jesus could not eat or rest because multitudes of sick and suffering people swarmed around him (i.e. Mark 3:8-10, 20), making his messianic mission nearly impossible to complete.

While Jesus demonstrated nearly unlimited compassion on those who were sick and suffering—he healed countless of them—these poor people serve as a sad example to us of people who see in God a means to an end without even knowing they are doing it. As the gospel narrative unfolds, we learn that Jesus did not come to heal the sick or cast out demons, but to deal with the root cause of all human suffering—the guilt and power of sin. Jesus' messianic mission was not to serve as a walking emergency room or medical clinic. Instead his mission would take him to the cross, the very place the suffering crowds did not want to see him go. The multitudes who sought out Jesus didn't care about the root cause of their suffering. They just wanted to be healed, right then and there. And they could not see, nor did they much care, how a crucified Jesus would save them from something much greater than sickness.

In this tragic set of circumstances we see how the symptoms (sickness and demon possession) of the deeper human condition (the pride stemming from our fallen nature), blinded these people to the fact that in Jesus' death and resurrection, the human condition would find its ultimate and final cure. Desperate people do desperate things. Sufferers don't want ultimate solutions as much as they want immediate relief. These crowds saw in Jesus a means to an end. In their eyes, it didn't matter why Jesus came, it only mattered that he had the power to heal them. Because of human sin and pride, they saw in Jesus an opportunity to gain relief. They were using God without even knowing that they were doing so.

Then there are those who seek to use God's power with much more transparent motives. In Acts 19:11-10, we read of the seven sons of a certain Sceva, a Jewish high priest. In this passage, Luke recounts how God was doing remarkable things through the ministry of the apostle Paul to confirm the preaching of the gospel and call people to faith. God's power was so clearly manifest in Ephesus that people were healed simply by touching handkerchiefs and aprons which Paul had touched. We read that demons fled in terror and that many who witnessed this manifestation of the kingdom of God subsequently extolled the name of Jesus.

But others saw this manifestation of the power of God as a "golden" opportunity. Seeing in the ministry of Paul a model for their own personal gain, the seven sons of Sceva, likewise sought to perform exorcisms in the name of this Jesus "whom Paul proclaims." As we read in verse 15, much to their chagrin, one of the demons these seven men attempted to cast out "answered them, 'Jesus I know, and Paul I recognize, but who are you?' And the man in whom was the evil spirit leaped on them, mastered all of them and overpowered them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded.'" In attempting to use the power of God for personal gain, these men ended

up on the short end of a good old fashioned whipping. So much for their foolish attempt to use the name of Jesus to serve their own ends! God will not be mocked.

That people in the post-apostolic period continued to use the name of Jesus for personal gain can be seen in the warning set forth in the Didache (“Teaching”), which was likely written around the end of the first century. Readers of the Didache are warned that “whoever says in the Spirit, ‘give me money,’ or anything else [like that], do not listen to him.” While the seven sons of Sceva operated on the fringe of the church, the warning found in the Didache indicates some were using the gospel ministry itself as a means of personal gain. The fact that in the earliest days of the church Christians were being warned about men within the church who would claim the leading or the prompting of the Holy Spirit to then ask for money, is a very good indication that this was not an uncommon occurrence. The author of the Didache warns Christians not to heed these appeals, because it should be clear to anyone with a modicum of Bible knowledge and common sense that the Holy Spirit would not lead anyone to do this.

The shameless appeal mentioned in the Didache is not bound to the post-apostolic age. We can see similar appeals today on Christian television, in churches, hotel meeting rooms and convention centers where faith-healers and prosperity preachers promise their eager audiences that God will heal and/or bless them—if only those in attendance prove they have enough faith by giving money to the preacher, who, of course, never quite puts matters that directly. Suffering folk are promised healing, a reversal of their present circumstances, and greater prosperity, if only they exercise faith. And the way you exercise your faith in these circles is to part with your hard-earned greenbacks. That which you treasure the most becomes the measure of your faith. And since you cannot give your money to God directly, you give your money to God through the auspices of the healer/prosperity preacher.

Just as some in the early church were doing, a number of our contemporaries use the healing power of God as the means to solve people’s problems and alleviate their suffering. They claim to control this power because they have supposedly mastered those divine laws of healing and prosperity which enable those with faith to receive the desired outcome. Many of these healers and prosperity preachers own expensive jet-aircraft and live in absolute luxury, the “proof” that the laws of divine prosperity actually work—at least for those who claim to have mastered them and who claim they can teach these laws to others, for a price, of course.

While critics of the prosperity gospel (both within and without the church) call attention to what would seem to be obvious—these men are getting rich off the gospel—their critics often miss the obvious. Of course, they are getting rich from the gospel! That’s the whole point. It is hard to tell others how to be prosperous if you yourself show no signs of mastering the laws of prosperity. A poor prosperity preacher, or a sick faith-healer is someone in need of a new career! The irony is that the more audacious the preacher/healer is in extending promises of health, wealth and happiness, the more ostentatious they must be. This is why these preachers shamelessly flaunt their lavish lifestyles in the face of those poor suffering people who seek them out. The garish excess is the proof that these preachers do indeed practice what they preach and that they know what they are talking about—“how to get more from God.”

It should come as no surprise to those who know the New Testament that there are people preaching Christ for personal gain. Paul warned us that this would be the case (Philippians 1:15-18). From the time of the early church until the end of the age, Paul warns, people will attempt to tickle itching ears. In his second letter to Timothy, Paul warns his young pastor friend that in the last days “there will come times of difficulty. For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power. Avoid such people” (2 Timothy 3:1-5).

We can find almost every one of these “difficulties” somewhere in the contemporary church. There is a self-esteem gospel for those who are proud because they love themselves. There is a prosperity gospel for those who love money. There is a healing gospel for those not content to accept the will of God should he bring suffering into their lives. And those preaching these gospels seem to be doing quite well in difficult times, thank you. Preachers who seek to preach to the proud have an eager audience and can preach of a God who is there to meet all their needs.

If promising health and prosperity is an obvious (albeit tragic) way to turn God into a product to sell to eager consumers, selling salvation is surely lowest form of the sinful attempt to use God for sinful ends. Promising health and wealth to desperate people is one thing. Promising to ensure the salvation of lost loved ones, or shortening their time in purgatory, is quite another.

One of the most infamous religious hucksters of all time was Martin Luther’s adversary, John Tetzel (1465-1519). Tetzel was a Dominican friar best known for what is perhaps the most notorious commercial jingle of all time, “as soon as a coin in coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs.” Tetzel was zealously raising funds from German peasants to be used for the construction of the magnificent St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome. To enhance sales of his indulgences—for which he claimed Papal endorsement—Tetzel even prepared a chart showing the amount of money required to shorten the time in purgatory for each particular sin someone was known to have committed.

Luther was sufficiently angered by Tetzel’s antics that he posted his famous 95 Theses on the university chapel door in Wittenberg. So egregious were Tetzel’s methods that the Roman church roundly condemned his actions. While historians quibble about whether or not Luther exaggerated Tetzel’s offenses and whether or not Rome really opposed what Tetzel was doing, the fact of the matter is that John Tetzel has become the poster-boy for preachers who promise salvation in exchange for money.

While Tetzel is perhaps the most notable case of using God for personal gain, some of our own contemporaries have come rather close. When the Assemblies of God tried to block Jimmy Swaggart from returning to the pulpit after a number of very public and embarrassing sexual peccadillos, Swaggart proclaimed that “if I do not return to the pulpit this weekend, millions of people will go to hell.” Such hubris shocks us. And then there was Oral Roberts’s notorious 1987 fund raising drive in which Roberts announced to his television audience that unless he raised \$8 million by that March, God would “call him home.” Reportedly, the appeal generated

\$9.1 million in gifts from people wanting to prolong Roberts' life. Swaggart and Roberts were not selling salvation *per se*, but they were clearly using the salvation of others as a form of blackmail to further their ministry's fund-raising, and in Swaggart's case, to keep his face before the camera.

Because Tetzels, Swaggart's and Robert's antics were so repugnant, they make easy targets. Their attempts to use their sacred calling for personal gain are easy to see, as their motives are hardly hidden. But another instance where people seek to use God in dangerous ways often goes unnoticed by many—especially by those Christians who find ethics and politics far more interesting (and in some cases, far more important) than theology. I'm thinking of those cases in which groups of people seek to use God for their collective (and most often political) ends.

One manifestation of this tendency to use God on a grand scale is that of religious nationalism, in which the unofficial national motto is "God is on our side." The corollary of such a statement is obvious. Those who hold to such notions tend to see their national identity as inseparable from the larger kingdom and purposes of God. To put it in more concrete terms, if theirs is a Christian nation, it must logically follow that their nation's actions are almost always justified. After all, God is on their side. Sadly, a number of American Christians have been prone to this way of thinking.

While the Bible clearly teaches that God ordains all the affairs of men and nations (e.g. Job 12:23; Psalm 33:10; Daniel 2:37; Acts 17:26), since the time of the New Covenant and the Jewish diaspora, no nation on earth can claim to be the apple of God's eye and the exclusive focus of his divine purposes. In this sense, America is no more of a "Christian nation" than is Saudi Arabia. And yet, there is also no doubt that God has blessed America with the presence of many Christians who have served as salt and light throughout our history. It is clear that God has provided our nation with countless material blessings, liberty and economic prosperity, as but two examples. Furthermore, God has clearly used America to further his providential purposes. It was America which defeated the great fascist regimes (think of Hitler's envisioned Third Reich) and it was America which ultimately brought an end to Soviet Communism.

Just as pride exists in sinful individuals, it exists in nations. The danger in using God in this way is that people invoke "Christian America"—if you wish, you can substitute any other nation here—over against those "pagan" and godless nations they happen to oppose. "God is on our side" easily becomes the moral justification for military and/or political action on virtually any scale. Yes, God's favor is invoked when the cause may be just and right. But this can also be done when the cause may be nothing but sinful national interest. Sadly, people who think that God is on their side because of national identity have trouble making the important distinction between God's providential purposes, and some sort of divine right attached to their national identity.

It is also important to consider the corollary I mentioned earlier. When God is used in this manner, those who are not on "God's side" are easily demonized on a national basis. They are often considered "godless" and beyond the blessing and favor of God. The Scriptures can be twisted so that their opponents become the modern Amelkites, Canaanites, and Jebusites, subject

to the just judgment of God, just as God commanded Joshua to do when Israel entered Canaan. While Israel was a theocracy with a type of Christ (Joshua) serving as its covenant mediator and military leader, those categories cannot be transferred to contemporary situations without grave theological error and a serious misapplication of the biblical narrative. It is to use God in the worst possible way, when he becomes a mascot for national interest and as an excuse for all kinds of nefarious behavior.

Because of their designs of world conquest and their subjugation of countless millions of people, as Americans, we had every right—indeed it was our national duty—to oppose the despotic Hitler, Mussolini and Tojo. But we could not do so as “Christian America” righteously fighting against the godless tyrants of the East. America went to war against Germany, Italy and Japan because they attacked sovereign nations and sought world domination. Just as we have the obligation to defend our wives and children from grave danger, so too nations have the obligation to defend themselves against hostile invaders who seek their subjugation and/or elimination. But this is not the same thing as invoking God as our defender on a national basis, because we are supposedly his people and our national purpose is identified with his. The nationalist who uses God proclaims “God will smite our enemies” before taking up the sword in his righteous cause, while the Christian should pray “thy will be done” before he takes up his.

The point is that God is not an American. He is not Dutch, nor German. He is not Irish or Italian. We cannot invoke him as the king and defender of our nation, although his providential purposes may indeed be to preserve us and use our nation to further his mysterious ends. To invoke God as our national defender is an especially egregious example of using God to further sinful and proud human ends. While Israel could invoke the name of YHWH as defender under the terms of the covenant God made with them at Mount Sinai, we cannot. It is that simple.

The same “God is on our side” motto surely is at work in much of contemporary American politics. Yes, God has spoken about many moral issues in his word, and yes, every Christian votes as a Christian citizen of a secular nation. And yet in many instances, well-intended Christians frame political debate in the same terms described above. This thinking runs as follows. Since certain candidates support particular moral issues, then, it is often implied “God is on their side.” Again, the corollary is clear. God does not favor those candidates who don’t support a particular moral issue. They can be demonized as those who oppose God and his kingdom. The irony is that it is possible that the former candidate might not be a Christian and yet stand on the right side of a certain moral issue, while the latter just may be a believer, who does not yet see the full implications of those things taught in God’s word. But then, this is what happens when we use God to political ends. Instead of letting God be God, our sinful pride leads us to make such pronouncements which are not ours to make. In these cases, God is not sovereign, he is a mascot.

Aside from the fact that God raises up rulers and uses them to further his providential purposes—Pharaoh, Nebuchadnezzar and Herod come to mind—to invoke the “God is on our side” motto in the midst of political discourse is surely to use God in a crass manner. Some of these moral issues which just happen to be the subject of political debate—say, pro-life issues, the sanctity of marriage, and so on—take on great significance, since God’s word speaks very directly

to these matters. Others are not quite in the same category—i.e, tax policy, national defense, education, etc. Surely when God has spoken it is a sin to ignore what he says and not apply our knowledge of God's will to our thinking and doing. But is it not a sin to elevate something about which God has not specifically spoken to the status of the former, and to then use these things to demonize a political opponent?

Not only does this “God is on our side” mind set generate great animus and polarization in public discourse (political debate becomes the righteous against the unrighteous), it surely cheapens God's reputation before the watching world. When God becomes the mascot for our cause, we are shamelessly using him for our own sinful purposes. We attempt to diminish his person and his power. In our minds, the sovereign becomes the subject, his power is a means to an end. And that end is our own self-centered and distorted perspective as individuals or nations.

If pride is a result of the fall, then using God for self-interest is the tragic fruit of our sinful nature. It is just as Paul said, we claim to be wise but in actuality we are fools. We all do it, sometimes unwittingly, sometimes intentionally. That is why we must do everything in our power to focus on the greatness of God and the cross of Jesus Christ. Focusing upon a great God who does as he pleases keeps us in our place. And focusing upon the cross of Christ reminds us of the cost God paid to forgive us for all of those times we sought to use him and his power for our own sinful ends.