

# Just how good is the theology of GOD BLESS AMERICA?

Colleagues,

This posting consists of two responses to the omnipresent mantra in US national theology for these past 7 months: God bless America. The first is from Gary Dixon, an associate minister from downunder in the Lutheran Church of Australia. The second one, brought to my attention by Steve Hitchcock, comes from a recent issue of The Other Side. Peace & Joy!

Ed

---

*Dear Ed, I've been meaning to write to you for a couple of weeks regarding this.....but I honestly have to say thank you, thank you, thank you!*

*From the emails that I've been getting from American friends and other reports from various sources I was beginning to think that all Christian Americans had tucked their bibles and convictions under their arms and launched into some sort of self-righteous crusade.*

*From our perspective here in Australia it appears that anybody and anything that threatens the lifestyle of the richest country in the world is likely to be threatened – if not literally pounded to dust – by that richest country, all in the name of democracy and freedom.*

*My youth were asking many pointed questions about the situation. They were possibly over-reacting a little and*

accusing George Bush of being a terrorist. I put together this analogy to try to explain it to them. It takes just a couple of minutes to read:

There is a town where there is a very rich – obscenely rich – man living in a huge mansion with acres of gardens around him and every possible luxury at his fingertips. His immediate family and even his staff and servants live a pretty comfortable life. Surrounding his estate live some of his cousins. They aren't as rich as he is, but are still very comfortable compared to the people in the slums. The slums are on the other side of town. Far enough away that the rich man doesn't have to see or smell them. Over there the people live lives that seem almost hopeless. Their children are sick and dying for lack of basic food and medicine, their housing is poor, education is almost non-existent and there's an all pervading sense of helplessness. They could never, ever conceive of getting out of the situation that they were in.

The problem is that most of these guys not only work for the rich man but owe him so much money that they'll never even start to repay the debt they owe even after working for their entire lives.

And a strange thing is that the rich man is not simply content with this situation, but regards it as his right to be so far above the slum dwellers in every possible way. He points to his opulence as a sign of God's blessing. He's convinced that it's his divine right to be where and who he is. His richness, his technical expertise, the way that he treats his family and friends, all prove that he is where he is because God intended it that way. It's patently obvious to him that he and his family are simply more important and more valuable than other people. His wealth proves it.

(This in spite of the fact that the rich man's ancestors used to be very poor themselves, and actually fought a war a couple of hundred years ago to free themselves from what they saw as a hopeless situation for them!)

Then one of the slum dwellers suddenly snaps. He's just watched yet another of his relatives slowly die from a preventable disease. The medicine exists to treat the condition, but it may as well have been on the moon for all the good it was. Only the rich man or his cousins could possibly afford it.

Hopelessness overwhelms the slum dweller. Logic and any sense of perspective go out of the window. His mind starts to focus, evilly. He slowly and meticulously starts to plan. He recruits a young friend who is feeling the same way, and they plan together.

Early one morning the young man sneaks over the walls of the rich man's estate with a bomb attached to his body. He climbs into a room where some of the rich man's innocent children are playing and detonates that bomb. The bomber and three children are killed. Its a horrible situation. A tragic waste of life.

It causes all parents everywhere to empathise and to hold their own children a little tighter and to wonder about what's ahead, about what's "out there" that's going to affect them and theirs.

At the same time they wait with baited breath for the rich man's reaction.

Is it possible – even remotely – that the tragic loss of three of his treasured children will cause the rich man to reflect a little on what life was like for the suicide

bomber? Will he begin to grasp, even through his own grief and horror, what it would be like to watch many of his children – many more than three – die slowly and horribly? Will he begin to relate to the fact that down in the slums over thirty children – all of them precious to their parents – die of starvation or diarrhoea or measles every single day?

Is it possible that this terrible tragedy in the rich man's life will make him wake up to the horror of the situation that exists in his town? A situation that, if not created by him, is actively supported and maintained by him to his own advantage. Could it possibly happen that his conscience is pricked and he sees the extent of his overweening arrogance and pride and actually repents of it?

It seems not.

The rich man is filled with a sense of righteous vengeance. His reaction is to take a fleet of bulldozers to the other side of town – to the slums – and demolish half of them. A place that was already filthy and hopeless is totally destroyed. Many people flee the slums and ask for help. Some appeal to the rich man's cousins for refuge, but they lock them up or turn them away. They're very suspicious of the refugees and accuse them of bringing their problems on themselves.

The rich man's obsession is fuelled by the fact that he has information that there is a mastermind behind the murder of his children. He's going to let nothing stop him from finding that murderer. He makes carefully crafted, emotion filled speeches to rally his immediate family and staff to his cause. His cousins join in his crusade. Their interests are very much tied to his, and they feel threatened too.

The situation is constantly in the news. The rich man, after

*all, owns all the media, and expresses his horror through that media. Who ever hears the voice of the poor man?*

*Now we've reached a situation where the rich man has reduced the slums to rubble. And he's so caught up in the passion of his revenge that he's looking to other towns, other slum areas to crush as well.*

*An irony of the situation is that he's increased his spending on bulldozers and other destructive equipment to the point where it far exceeds all the debts that the slum dwellers owe him. He could write off all of their debt and provide abundant food for them and adequate medicine, health care, education and other infrastructure for far less than he's spending on bulldozers and the people to operate them.*

*If he were to do this, how far might such an action go towards diffusing the situation to the point where minds wouldn't snap and lead people to do horrible, destructive, evil things to the rich man's family?*

*But his pride won't let him do that. His ego gets in the way. His taste for revenge is strong. His over-developed sense of his own value drives him on. Far from repenting of his pride and selfishness, he actually invokes God to help him in his battle, clinging to the notion that he is especially blessed by God and therefore has the right to protect himself as he sees fit.*

*And the world waits.*

*Where do we go from here?*

*Anyway, thanks again for your encouraging article.*

*Sincerely in Christ,*

Gary Dixon  
Perth, Western Australia

---

*MIXED BLESSING*, by Ched Myers. "Reprinted with permission from *The Other Side*, January-February 2001. For subscriptions or more information, visit [www.theotherside.org](http://www.theotherside.org) or call 1-800-700-9280." In these difficult days of warmaking, the phrase "God bless America" has become a patriotic litmus test. As the slogan continues to fill political speeches and public discourse, I've become convinced that it invites theological investigation. So when a Baptist friend in North Carolina asked me about the biblical background of the phrase, I went right to work.

I should admit from the start that, of all the nationalistic mantras circulating currently, I find this phrase to be the most odious. There is something shrilly insistent about it. Its use of the imperative mood seems so presumptuously directive, in contrast to, say, the more traditionally religious "optative mood" ("May we receive Your blessing!").

Indeed, the results of my search for the use of the imperative in the Bible were revealing. I found that in the Hebrew Bible, the imperative "Bless!" occurs only thirty out of the several hundred times the verb *barak* generally appears. Of those thirty occurrences, the majority are liturgical exhortations to "bless the Lord," mostly in the Psalms (see, for example, Ps. 66:8, 96:2, 104:1). In other words, the act of blessing is most often directed toward heaven, not solicited from it.

Only four times in the entire Hebrew scriptural tradition do we find requests in the imperative for divine blessing. In one case God instructs it – but only after the people vouch that

they have been obedient (Deut. 26:15). Moses, as part of his farewell litany on Mount Nebo, petitions God to bless the tribe of Levi (Deut. 33:11). And King David twice invokes God's blessing, once for himself (2 Sam. 7:29) and once for the people (Ps. 28:9).

These four examples are as close as the Bible ever comes to the billboards and bumper stickers of our present moment – a pretty thin theological foundation indeed. And unlike the current cant, the Bible always situates the request in a specifically prayerful or liturgical context.

Even more interesting – and problematic for the patriots – is the evidence from the New Testament. Of the forty-one appearances of the Greek verb *eulogeo* (literally “speaking a good word”), only twice do we find it in the imperative mood. In neither case does it involve God. It does, however, involve us – and our enemies. In Jesus' Sermon on the Plain, he urges his disciples to “Bless those who curse you” (Luke 6:28). These instructions are later echoed by the apostle Paul: “Bless those who persecute you, bless and do not curse” (Rom. 12:14).

This remarkable scriptural testimony represents a decidedly mixed blessing for U.S. churches right now. Indeed, in the days following September 11, most of our churches have been busy endorsing the national demand for divine favor. Few have had the courage to exhort a “blessing of enemies” in the teeth of surging patriotism and war fever.

My Baptist friend wrote that “God bless America” seems to him like “an entitlement claim, an assertion of righteousness if not hubris, a call for our tribal god to defeat their tribal god.” He wondered if the correct approach ought not rather to be “entreaty language, suggesting humility, beseeching, even begging.”

*I believe he is exactly right. But the U.S. presumption of God's blessing is deeply rooted in our national ideology of Manifest Destiny. As theology, it is heretical – but it certainly proves compelling as political rhetoric in the theater of wartime. (I would hasten to add that the same is true for a Muslim militant's assumption that Allah is on the side of his jihad.)*

*The roots of the English word bless are also curiously informative. The term derives from the Old English bledsian, meaning to consecrate, usually with blood. Are our national calls for God's blessing – particularly when uttered from presidential or Pentagon pulpits while retaliatory bombs fall on Afghanistan – somehow euphemistic for an ancient desire for blood-vengeance? If so, then our demands upon the deity, like those of the mujahedeen, are truly “missing the mark” – a central metaphor in the biblical tradition for “sin.”*

*I hate to rain on the patriotic parade that so many of my fellow Christians in the United States have joined. But it appears that as far as Jesus and Paul are concerned, the only blessing we should be soliciting right now is our own “good word” directed toward our enemies.*