

Repentance in America, What Might it Look Like?

Colleagues,

The same U.S. President Lincoln who in 1863 authorized the last Thursday in November as a national Thanksgiving Day also signed the following proclamation earlier in that very same year. How about that? Right in the hellish horror of the Civil War, national repentance and national thanksgiving go together. Maybe even in that very order—Mea culpa first, then Now thank we all our God.

Proclamation Appointing a “National Day of Fasting, Prayer and Humiliation”

Washington, D.C.

March 30, 1863 Senator James Harlan of Iowa, whose daughter married President Lincoln’s son Robert, introduced this Resolution in the Senate on March 2, 1863. The Resolution asked President Lincoln to proclaim a national day of prayer and fasting. The Resolution was adopted on March 3, and signed by Lincoln on March 30, one month before the fast day was observed.

By the President of the United States of America.

A Proclamation.

Whereas, the Senate of the United States, devoutly recognizing the Supreme Authority and just Government of Almighty God, in all the affairs of men and of nations, has, by a resolution, requested the President to designate and set apart a day for National prayer and humiliation.

And whereas it is the duty of nations as well as of men, to own

their dependence upon the overruling power of God, to confess their sins and transgressions, in humble sorrow, yet with assured hope that genuine repentance will lead to mercy and pardon; and to recognize the sublime truth, announced in the Holy Scriptures and proven by all history, that those nations only are blessed whose God is the Lord.

And, insomuch as we know that, by His divine law, nations like individuals are subjected to punishments and chastisements in this world, may we not justly fear that the awful calamity of civil war, which now desolates the land, may be but a punishment, inflicted upon us, for our presumptuous sins, to the needful end of our national reformation as a whole People?

We have been the recipients of the choicest bounties of Heaven. We have been preserved, these many years, in peace and prosperity. We have grown in numbers, wealth and power, as no other nation has ever grown. But we have forgotten God. We have forgotten the gracious hand which preserved us in peace, and multiplied and enriched and strengthened us; and we have vainly imagined, in the deceitfulness of our hearts, that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own. Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace, too proud to pray to the God that made us!

It behooves us then, to humble ourselves before the offended Power, to confess our national sins, and to pray for clemency and forgiveness.

Now, therefore, in compliance with the request, and fully concurring in the views of the Senate, I do, by this my proclamation, designate and set apart Thursday, the 30th day of April, 1863, as a day of national humiliation, fasting and prayer. And I do hereby request all the People to abstain, on

that day, from their ordinary secular pursuits, and to unite, at their several places of public worship and their respective homes, in keeping the day holy to the Lord, and devoted to the humble discharge of the religious duties proper to that solemn occasion.

All this being done, in sincerity and truth, let us then rest humbly in the hope authorized by the Divine teachings, that the united cry of the Nation will be heard on high, and answered with blessings, no less than the pardon of our national sins, and the restoration of our now divided and suffering Country, to its former happy condition of unity and peace.

In witness whereof, I have hereunto set my hand and caused the seal of the United States to be affixed.

Done at the City of Washington, this thirtieth day of March, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three, and of the Independence of the United States the eighty seventh.

*By the President: Abraham Lincoln
William H. Seward, Secretary of State.*

That was 141 years ago. How might nationwide U.S. repentance—if we ever could replicate what they did then—take place today in the U.S.A? What might it look like? That’s what Pastor Jerry Burce (Messiah Lutheran Church, Fairview Heights, Ohio) asked some present and former members of his congregation. And they responded. He wrote to tell me about it, and subsequently got permission for passing their words on to ThTh readers. Here it is.

Ed,

I forwarded ThTh 335 [Sc. its topic was “No place for national

repentance in Bush's or Kerry's campaign theology"] to a handful of lay folks who I thought might appreciate it. I attached an introductory note—"You'll find this of interest, perhaps. The question left hanging: what might 'repentance' in America look like? All of you, I suspect, would have some good guesses about that. I'd be interested in what they are. If so inclined, tell me. —Jerry"

Here's what came back in under 24 hours from three of them: Ward, Tina and Scott.

[Jerry begins with sthese words to the responders.]

Ward, Tina, Scott—

Thanks for your quick responses. I'm tucking them away at the back of my own mind, and am taking the liberties a) of passing them along to Ed Schroeder who I know will appreciate them, and b) of sharing them with you so that I'm not the only hoarder of the wealth.

By way of intro: WARD is Director of Development for Lutheran Metropolitan Ministry, a leading social ministry organization in Cleveland that specializes in services to the elderly, the disabled, troubled teens, and ex-prisoners. TINA has spent 12+ years in the Deep South, much of it in ministry to the rural poor. Her husband is presently Director of IT at Concordia College, Selma, [Alabama, the only historic Black Lutheran College in America]. SCOTT is in Boston where he works for Responsible Wealth, an organization that Ward and Tina might well be interested in learning more about. See www.responsiblewealth.org

Here's what each of you said in response to my question about what repentance might look like in America—

Ward:

I think that American repentance would be an undertaking so disruptive that I cannot imagine we would seek it. Even the idea of God blessing the American kingdom is frightful – US who are accustomed, committed and entitled to being first will not go to one knee voluntarily.

Tina:

I'm glad this arrived in the morning when I have a bit more brain power, as it took about all of it to get through. It was good; not the typical message by any means.

My idea of repentance for America would be to stop lording it over everyone about how rich we are, when so many of our people live in subhuman poverty. I am astonished when I see how some people live here in Alabama—in Selma and in the rural areas. I'm not talking about homeless people, I am talking about families living in horrible substandard housing without water, electricity, sewage, heat. There are well over 100 churches in the Selma (pop. 28,000) area – one Lutheran, one Catholic, one Episcopalian, many Baptists—and yet we cannot keep the shelves on our Food Bank filled. I know this is a national problem in many ways, but it seems as if good Christians could at least have enough compassion to buy and donate canned goods each week (how sanitized is that?). I first heard that “God Bless America” religion several years ago while standing on a bridge over the Rio Grande in El Paso watching Mexican families float across to ‘freedom.’ My host could only shake her head and say, “Thank God I’m born in America.” All I could think of was, “Why? How did I get up here, and the others down there?” NO answers...

Scott:

I like the notion of the Folk Religion of God Bless America. Did you ever see the movie, Head of State with Chris Rock. Rock portrays the first African American president, and ends every speech with "God Bless America, and everyplace else."

The parable penned by Ed Scroeder holds not only with America and its place within the world, but also within our own country. Both Right and Left are themselves microcosms of The Truth is on Our Side, and views the other side as enemy/ignorant/evil. The greatest sadness for me is to hear long time progressive colleagues say the most heinous things about those that voted for Bush. One person concluded a long screed, published on a widely read national website:

"So our guy lost the election. Why shouldn't those of us on the coasts feel superior? We eat better, travel more, dress better, watch cooler movies, earn better salaries, meet more interesting people, listen to better music and know more about what's going on in the world. If you voted for Bush, we accept that we have to share the country with you. We're adjusting to the possibility that there may be more of you than there are of us. But don't demand our respect. You lost it on November 2." (Ted Ralls, Commondreams.org)

A colleague of mine at work penned an op-ed she is trying to get published demanding a "divorce" between red and blue states-splitting into two countries. The notion that our state of Massachusetts itself is 58% blue and 42% red and that her liberal town was 40% red, is blocked by these deeper troubled feelings of hatred.

The day after the election the most widely circulated electoral

email that I received was one entitled the New Map and featured a blue swatch engulfing Democratic states and all of Canada, labelled "The United States of Canada" – the rest of the map was red and labelled Jesusland. Aside from being poorly informed about the state of Canadian politics which has its own red swatch cut across it, the map to me portrayed the left's contempt for the impulse of faith. I support the Left's role in creating a secular society, in insisting that no particular religious viewpoint be enshrined and forced upon others. But in so doing, I wonder whether they (we?) haven't created a public space intolerant of political positions motivated by faith.

I think of the debate over teaching creationism in schools. It has become so very polarized and that makes me sad. But truth be told I think there is a place for talking about Adam and Eve, as well as the great turtle that rose from the floor and holds earth on her back, and whatever other creation stories have enlivened people since time memorial. Isn't there something in all human people that longs for the sacred and the mysterious? Have we served ourselves well by teaching only the Big Bang as a cold and scientific formula in which it is hard to stand in mystery with awe? I sometimes wonder if the science-only insistence of secularism hasn't laid the foundation for the environmental mess we find ourselves in today. If global climate change plays out as most think it will, with increased storms and coastal flooding, that sounds like the script for Noah, the Sequel.

So what is to be my response as a Christian person? First, I think Ed is spot on to focus on the "I" stories of the Bible. We live in a "you" oriented world. Both sides do it, if only you rich would pay more taxes; if only you poor would work harder. I once heard being politically liberal defined as someone who believes that every social problem can be addressed without them changing a thing about how they live. Exaggerated,

but a lot of truth there I think, and probably not just for liberals. This gets to the heart of repentance and humility – what’s my role, what do I have to do differently, for what do I need to seek forgiveness.

Second, I think one of the stories of this election is not simply the evangelical vote, but the thirst for community and spirituality. I don’t see all those who voted for Bush as greedy, fearful or empty-headed. Some surely are these things, but I think most are people who desire community, who care about the messages told by cultural story-tellers (TV, movies, news outlets). What response does the Left have to this? What community does the Left offer? The evangelical churches have people to church several times a week for prayer group, for bible study, for worship – what are these things if not in part community building and times of story telling? Where does the Left invite this sort of sharing?

[Here’s Jerry’s response to all three of them.]

I agree deeply and sadly with Ward. Repentance, Nineveh-style (see Jonah 3) ain’t in the cards, for reasons that Scott elucidates from his blue side of the divide. Tina reminds me forcefully of the repenting I need to keep doing myself, and that I certainly need to provoke in the congregation I serve. (Do I ever!) Why is it, by the way, that her final thought seems to elude so many Americans, red and blue alike? That I’m a wealthy American and other guy a dirt-poor Mexican is a dark mystery. An accident of cosmic unfairness? No, worse: an act of divine unfairness. So Luther would say, at any rate.

But then Luther, believing the Gospel, has more nerve than most anyone else when it comes to calling the thing as it is. He’d be quick to point out that we ought to take Jesus seriously

when he tells us that God operates with the principle of noblesse oblige: from those to whom much has (unfairly) been given, much will be expected; and when it comes to the expectation, screaming "Unfair!" will get us nowhere. Kyrie eleison.

Scott's piece strikes me immediately as a great example of repentance-in-the-making. He's a bona-fide blue boy. (The folks at his home congregation, the one I serve, overwhelmingly red, would instantly tell you as much if only they knew what he did for a living.) Notice, then, how his critique starts (and stays) at home, with his own kind. He takes the "I" seriously and winds up asking the kind of questions that repenting people will find themselves asking. It occurs to me that the great majority of his blue confreres would regard him as a traitor. But then repentance necessarily entails betrayal, does it not? The turn to God—and, along the way, to honesty—means a break with fellow sinners who aren't inclined to make that turn, who then will take it out on the one who does the turning. Saul learned as much on his way to becoming Paul.

That's one of the biggest reasons, I'll bet, why Ward is right about the knees not bending, or why Tina sees so little in the way of whole-hearted mercy for the black poor. Luther again: "Suffering, suffering, cross, cross. That's all a Christian has to expect. Nothing else." To repent—the first and fundamental Christian move—is to expose yourself to crucifixion. And who wants that? But woe to us all if we don't start wanting it soon. Or to put that another way, bouncing off Ward: God in his own way, in his time, will force knees to the ground.

So much for the moment—and thank you each, so much, for provoking more thought.

—Jerry

One more item.

A dear buddy from our old days at Valparaiso University, Bob Springsteen, sent us something apropos of this. "My mother's hymn book which is at least 110 years old (published by The Evangelical Lutheran Joint Synod of Ohio and Other States – ninth edition) contains 3 hymns of (for) National Humiliation (#151-153). They fit in with the recent ThTh-postings prior to and after the election. Bob"

*151 When in our hour of utmost need
We know not where to look for aid,
When days and nights of anxious thought
Nor help nor counsel yet have brought,*

*Then this our comfort is alone,
That we may meet before thy throne,
And cry, O faithful God to thee
For rescue from our misery:*

*To Thee may raise our hearts and eyes,
Repenting sore with bitter sighs,
And seek Thy pardon for our sin,
And respite from our griefs within.*

*For Thou hast promised, graciously
To hear all those who cry to thee
Through Him whose name alone is great,
Our Saviour and our Advocate.*

*And thus we come, O God, today,
And all our woes before Thee lay,
For tried, afflicted, lo! we stand,
Peril and foes on every hand.*

O, hide not for our sins Thy face:

*Absolve us through Thy boundless grace:
Be with us in our anguish still,
Free us at last from every ill.*

*That so with all our hearts may we
Once more with joy give thanks to Thee,
And walk obedient to Thy Word,
And now and ever praise the Lord.*

152

*While o'er our guilty land, O Lord,
We view the terrors of thy sword,
O wither shall the helpless fly?
To whom but Thee direct their cry?*

*The helpless sinner's cries and tears
Are grown familiar to Thine ears;
Oft has Thy mercy sent relief,
When all was fear and helpless grief.*

*See, we repent, we weep, we, mourn--
To our forsaken God we turn!
O spare our guilty country-spare
The church which Thou hast planted there.*

*We plead Thy grace, indulgent God;
We plead Thy Son's atoning blood;
We plead Thy gracious promises-
And are they unavailing pleas?*

*These pleas, presented at Thy throne,
Have brought ten thousand blessings down
On guilty lands in helpless woe;
Let them prevail to save us too!*

153

*Lord Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace,
True God and Man art Thou!
Mighty to help in life and death,
O hear and help us now!
'Tis through Thy name alone we claim,
The mercy of Thy Father!*

*The times are sore and perilous
With heavy woes and wars,
Whence no man can deliver us
But Thou! O plead our cause,
That God may lay His wrath away,
Nor deal with us in anger.*

*We have deserved, and patiently
Would bear, whate'er Thou wilt,
But grace is mightier far with thee
Than all our sin and guilt;
Forgive us then, dear Lord, again;
Thy love is everfaithful.*

Lincolnian hymns, good for Thanksgiving and good for moving into Advent.

Peace & Joy! Ed Schroeder