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Liberties of Old

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This past week at a meeting of Forward in Faith, North America, held in Fort Worth, I had the privilege of hearing a sermon given by the Rt. Rev. Evans Kisekka, Bishop of the Diocese of Luweero in Uganda. With fire in his eyes, and charity in his voice, Bishop Kisekka reminded us that at the center of orthodoxy is our Lord's commandment to go and teach all nations "baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and the Holy Ghost." (Matthew 28:19).

I was moved by the calm and passionate way that Bishop Kisekka spoke. In one sense the subject of his sermon was nothing new. Orthodoxy, which means literally "right opinion," and is understood in the context of the church to mean "right belief" - the true teaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ as opposed to the false and heretical - has always had at its center the proclamation of our Lord's Kingdom. Every sacrament, every sermon, every Bible class, every word of encouragement or admonition includes, at one level or another, the purpose of making disciples. But with so much counterfeit gospel peddled about in the current Episcopal Church, Bishop Kisekka's words sounded in my ears like a clarion call.

This Sunday we will celebrate Independence Day. As I look forward to the beautiful and dignified way that we make our July 4th celebration at St. John's, the clarion call of Bishop Kisekka takes on an even deeper meaning.

Our country suffers from the same worldly rot as does our church. And the distance we are from sound orthodoxy in the current Episcopal Church parallels the distance that we are in our country from the religious faith of our founding fathers.

It was their religious faith that gave form to our liberties. Let me share with you some passages quoted by Mr. David Barton in his excellent and comprehensive work entitled Original Intent: The Courts, the Constitution, & Religion.

We begin with the father of our country. In his "Farewell Address" George Washington wrote, "Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports. In vain would that man claim the tribute of patriotism who

should labor to subvert these great pillars of human happiness." For Washington, the true patriotism which leads men to happiness must be founded upon the dispositions and habits of religion and morality.

President John Adams said much the same thing, emphasizing that only men who govern themselves through religion and morality are capable of political self-government. Speaking to the Militia of Massachusetts, he declared, "We have no government armed with power capable of contending with human passions unbridled by morality and religion... Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other."

And in the same theme, in his Notes on the State of Virginia, Thomas Jefferson wrote, "And can the liberties of a nation be thought secure if we have lost the only firm basis, a conviction in the minds of the people that these liberties are the gift of God? That they are not to be violated but with his wrath?"

Contrary to what is often said about their intentions, the framers of our Constitution believed that religious belief and practice were essential and necessary to the good health of the Republic. Until relatively recently, this was universally recognized. For instance, seventy-five years after the crafting of the Constitution, the intention of the framers was remembered clearly as documents from both the House of Representatives and the Senate demonstrate.

From the House Judiciary Committee (1853-1854), we read "At the time of the adoption of the Constitution and the amendments, the universal sentiment was that Christianity should be encouraged, not any one sect. Any attempt to level and discard all religion would have been viewed with universal indignation... It must be considered the foundation on which the whole structure rests." And from the Senate Judiciary Committee of the same period, "They intended, by this [First] Amendment, to prohibit "an establishment of religion" such as the English Church presented, or anything like it. But they had no fear or jealousy of religion itself, nor did they wish to see us an irreligious people... they did not intend to spread over all the public authorities and the whole public action of the nation the dead and revolting spectacle of atheistic apathy."

In his book, David Barton shows through our legal history how the intentions of our founding fathers are now turned on their head and spurned. It is well worth reading. But now I return to my point.

Our country has followed a parallel path to that of the Episcopal Church. And so what is our response? It is time to renew our proclamation of the Gospel, to offer what Bishop Kisekka called an essential part of orthodoxy.

Our country will not reclaim its religious foundations unless the hearts of our people are open to see the truth of God. The intentions of our forefathers will not resonate in the ears of our fellow country-men if their minds are closed to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

In the final analysis, the state, our nation, must deal with the actions of men through its laws. Our liberties are crafted for a freedom that is governed with justice. But the conscience and the "right belief" of men

must come through the work of the church. The state cannot govern the internal conscience of a man. That is why in their wisdom, the fathers of our country left the freedom of religion to our choice, which they intended primarily as choices between the various denominations of Christianity, and only secondarily in the sense of other world religions.

Grateful to God that we live with such freedom, now is the time to renew our lives before Him, to reclaim our liberties of old which do not change, and to work through each and every vocation and profession that Jesus Christ may be known and loved. As our founding fathers understood, the reformation of our country cannot be achieved apart from the reformation of our church.

The Rev. Dr. Michael L. Carreker

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