



Editorial: Be Careful What You Wish For!

There is a great deal of conversation (and shouting) these days about American exceptionalism, the idea that the United States is a nation specially chosen or blessed by God to be God's agent in the world. This idea of America as God's "chosen nation" carries with it so much baggage that it is hard to know where to begin, and the subject is fraught with emotional and theological overtones. Certainly, when the founders of the United States organized this new society in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, many of them were very sure that they had a chance, then, to begin in this so-called New World a civic society that would avoid all the errors and mistakes of the old European civilization from which they came. With the Enlightenment optimism that was so prevalent in those times, they felt they could establish a "Novus ordo seclorum" (new order of the ages), as enshrined on the Great Seal of the United States (see the back of a one-dollar bill). The "new order" was thought to be established by God (whatever they thought God was) and made the new country a beacon of hope and light to the world. Americans have been wrestling with this idea ever since.

The early Puritans are often cited in regard to this concept, and frequently with a great deal of scorn. Yet it is important to understand the Puritan divines in their theological and biblical contexts, something that is often overlooked. In understanding themselves as establishing a New Israel in the New World, they were cognizant of the history of the biblical Israel, for whom being chosen by God often seemed more like a curse than a blessing. Israel's chosenness meant that they were held by God to much higher expectations than the nations around them—expectations that they so often failed to live up to. Indeed, biblical Israel often chafed under the demands of chosenness and wished that instead, they could be like all the other nations, much to the disgust of God and the prophets. The Puritans understood that to claim to be God's chosen people was to inherit that often

freighted mantle, and constantly reminded their people that they were indeed not living up to God's demands.

But far too quickly, Americans generally transformed that idea of being a people under God's higher obligations and standards to a nation specially blessed by God (without those higher obligations). Indeed, the United States has often seen this ideal as a birthright rather than an obligation and has failed dramatically to live up to the calling they believe God has given them. Certainly, the idea of the United States as a chosen nation is aspirational and has been honored as much in the breach as anything else.

Some would say, in light of America's constant failure to live up to the ideals of a chosen nation, that then we ought to just dump the whole idea. Such a line of thinking, however, could only have us lower the obligations that we set for ourselves in the nation's founding documents and suggest that this nation was founded in ignorance and conceit. But without denying the many sins of the nation, it is important to understand that the ideals of the United States still inspire millions within the country and around the world to greater hope for the future.

Here is where American Christianity comes in. Founded in Enlightenment optimism and secular materialism, American society has a difficult time understanding concepts like brokenness, sin, repentance, and what it means to live as though we belong to God, with all the obligations and responsibilities that entails. Religious leaders and people need to model the forms of corporate humility, repentance, and forgiveness that are so central to our faith, and which our country so desperately needs. Religious people must demonstrate what it means to live under the acceptance of God's sovereignty, not as some lofty ideal but as a daily and integral part of our lives. If the nation of the United States is truly going to aspire to live as God's people, these are the lessons that we will have to learn and apply.

Note: As a part of America's claim to being a chosen nation comes the thorny issue of the relation of the dominant Christianity of the nation to the Jewish people, and to the concepts of chosenness that Christians have taken from the biblical people of Israel. How Christians speak of themselves in the light of their place in the biblical narrative is often problematic, and especially so as Christians move into the seasons of Lent and Easter. The Consultative Panel on Lutheran-Jewish Relations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America came out in 2022 with a thoughtful and very useful guide to proclaiming the faith in the light of these issues—one that should guide our preaching and proclamation. This guide, "Preaching and Teaching 'with Love and Respect for the Jewish People,'" can be found on the ELCA website.¹

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¹ <https://tinyurl.com/35j5c2vw>.