

The Christian Paradox

by Bill McKibben

Only 40 percent of Americans can name more than four of the Ten Commandments, and a scant half can cite any of the four authors of the Gospels. Twelve percent believe Joan of Arc was Noah's wife. This failure to recall the specifics of our Christian heritage may be further evidence of our nation's educational decline, but it probably doesn't matter all that much in spiritual or political terms. Here is a statistic that does matter: Three quarters of Americans believe the Bible teaches that "God helps those who help themselves." That is, three out of four Americans believe that this uber-American idea, a notion at the core of our current individualist politics and culture, which was in fact uttered by Ben Franklin, actually appears in Holy Scripture. The thing is, not only is Franklin's wisdom not biblical; it's counter-biblical. Few ideas could be further from the gospel message, with its radical summons to love of neighbor. On this essential matter, most Americans - most American Christians - are simply wrong, as if 75 percent of American scientists believed that Newton proved gravity causes apples to fly up.

Asking Christians what Christ taught isn't a trick. When we say we are a Christian nation - and, overwhelmingly, we do - it means something. People who go to church absorb lessons there and make real decisions based on those lessons; increasingly, these lessons inform their politics. (One poll found that 11 percent of U.S. churchgoers were urged by their clergy to vote in a particular way in the 2004 election, up from 6 percent in 2000.) When George Bush says that Jesus Christ is his favorite philosopher, he may or may not be sincere, but he is reflecting the sincere beliefs of the vast majority of Americans. And therein is the paradox. America is simultaneously the most professedly Christian of the developed nations and the least Christian in its behavior. That paradox - more important, perhaps, than the much touted ability of French women to stay thin on a diet of chocolate and cheese - illuminates the hollow at the core of our boastful, careening culture, ours is among the most spiritually homogenous rich nations on earth. Depending on which poll you look at and how the question is asked, somewhere around 85 percent of us call ourselves Christian. Israel, by way of comparison, is 77 percent Jewish. It is true that a smaller number of Americans - about 75 percent - claim they actually pray to God on a daily basis, and only 33 percent say they manage to get to church every week. Still, even if that 85 percent overstates actual practice, it clearly represents aspiration. In fact, there is nothing else that unites more than four fifths of America. Every other statistic one can cite about American behavior is essentially also a measure of the behavior of professed Christians. That's what America is: a place saturated in Christian identity.

But is it Christian? This is not a matter of angels dancing on the heads of pins. Christ was pretty specific about what he had in mind for his followers. What if we chose some simple criterion - say, giving aid to the poorest people - as a reasonable proxy for Christian behavior? After all, in the days before his crucifixion, when Jesus summed up his message for his disciples, he said the way you could tell the righteous from the damned was by whether they'd fed the hungry, slaked the thirsty, clothed the naked, welcomed the stranger, and visited the prisoner. What would we find then?

In 2004, as a share of our economy, we ranked second to last, after Italy, among developed countries in government foreign aid. Per capita we each provide fifteen cents a day in official development assistance to poor countries. And it's not because we were giving to private charities for relief work instead. Such funding increases our average daily donation by just six pennies, to twenty-one cents. It's also not because Americans were too busy taking care of their own; nearly 18 percent of American children lived in poverty (compared with, say, 8 percent in Sweden). In fact, by pretty much any measure of caring for the least among us you want to propose - childhood nutrition, infant mortality,

access to preschool - we come in nearly last among the rich nations, and often by a wide margin. The point is not just that (as everyone already knows) the American nation trails badly in all these categories; it's that the overwhelmingly Christian American nation trails badly in all these categories, categories to which Jesus paid particular attention. And it's not as if the numbers are getting better: the U.S. Department of Agriculture reported last year that the number of households that were "food insecure with hunger" had climbed more than 26 percent between 1999 and 2003.

This Christian nation also tends to make personal, as opposed to political, choices that the Bible would seem to frown upon. Despite the Sixth Commandment, we are, of course, the most violent rich nation on earth, with a murder rate four or five times that of our European peers. We have prison populations greater by a factor of six or seven than other rich nations (which at least should give us plenty of opportunity for visiting the prisoners). Having been told to turn the other cheek, we're the only Western democracy left that executes its citizens, mostly in those states where Christianity is theoretically strongest. Despite Jesus' strong declarations against divorce, our marriages break up at a rate - just over half - that compares poorly with the European Union's average of about four in ten. That average may be held down by the fact that Europeans marry less frequently, and by countries, like Italy, where divorce is difficult; still, compare our success with, say, that of the godless Dutch, whose divorce rate is just over 37 percent. Teenage pregnancy? We're at the top of the charts. Personal self-discipline - like, say, keeping your weight under control? Buying on credit? Running government deficits? Do you need to ask? Are Americans hypocrites? Of course they are. But most people (me, for instance) are hypocrites. The more troubling explanation for this disconnect between belief and action, I think, is that most Americans - which means most believers - have replaced the Christianity of the Bible, with its call for deep sharing and personal sacrifice, with a competing creed.

In fact, there may be several competing creeds. For many Christians, deciphering a few passages of the Bible to figure out the schedule for the End Times has become a central task. You can log on to RaptureReady.com for a taste of how some of these believers view the world - at this writing the Rapture Index had declined three points to 152 because, despite an increase in the number of U.S. pagans, "Wal-Mart is falling behind in its plan to bar code all products with radio tags." Other End-Timers are more interested in forcing the issue - they're convinced that the way to coax the Lord back to earth is to "Christianize" our nation and then the world. Consider House Majority Leader Tom DeLay. At church one day he listened as the pastor, urging his flock to support the administration, declared that "the war between America and Iraq is the gateway to the Apocalypse." DeLay rose to speak, not only to the congregation but to 225 Christian TV and radio stations. "Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "what has been spoken here tonight is the truth of God."

American churches, by and large, have done a pretty good job of loving the neighbor in the next pew. A pastor can spend all Sunday talking about the Rapture Index, but if his congregation is thriving you can be assured he's spending the other six days visiting people in the hospital, counseling couples, and sitting up with grieving widows. All this human connection is important. But if the theology makes it harder to love the neighbor a little farther away - particularly the poor and the weak - then it's a problem. And the dominant theologies of the moment do just that. They undercut Jesus, muffle his hard words, deaden his call, and in the end silence him. In fact, the soft-focus consumer gospel of the suburban megachurches is a perfect match for emergent conservative economic notions about personal responsibility instead of collective action. Privatize Social Security? Keep health care for people who can afford it? File those under "God helps those who help themselves."

Take Alabama as an example. In 2002, Bob Riley was elected governor of the state, where 90 percent of residents identify themselves as Christians. Riley could safely be called a conservative - right-wing

majordomo Grover Norquist gave him a Friend of the Taxpayer Award every year he was in Congress, where he'd never voted for a tax increase. But when he took over Alabama, he found himself administering a tax code that dated to 1901. The richest Alabamians paid 3 percent of their income in taxes, and the poorest paid up to 12 percent; income taxes kicked in if a family of four made \$4,600 (even in Mississippi the threshold was \$19,000), while out-of-state timber companies paid \$1.25 an acre in property taxes. Alabama was forty-eighth in total state and local taxes, and the largest proportion of that income came from sales tax - a super-regressive tax that in some counties reached into double digits. So Riley proposed a tax hike, partly to dig the state out of a fiscal crisis and partly to put more money into the state's school system, routinely ranked near the worst in the nation. He argued that it was Christian duty to look after the poor more carefully.

Had the new law passed, the owner of a \$250,000 home in Montgomery would have paid \$1,432 in property taxes - we're not talking Sweden here. But it didn't pass. It was crushed by a factor of two to one. Sixty-eight percent of the state voted against it - meaning, of course, something like 68 percent of the Christians who voted. The opposition was led, in fact, not just by the state's wealthiest interests but also by the Christian Coalition of Alabama. "You'll find most Alabamians have got a charitable heart," said John Giles, the group's president. "They just don't want it coming out of their pockets." On its website, the group argued that taxing the rich at a higher rate than the poor "results in punishing success" and that "when an individual works for their income, that money belongs to the individual." You might as well just cite chapter and verse from Poor Richard's Almanack. And whatever the ideology, the results are clear. "I'm tired of Alabama being first in things that are bad," said Governor Riley, "and last in things that are good."

A rich man came to Jesus one day and asked what he should do to get into heaven. Jesus did not say he should invest, spend, and let the benefits trickle down; he said sell what you have, give the money to the poor, and follow me. Few plainer words have been spoken. And yet, for some reason, the Christian Coalition of America - founded in 1989 in order to "preserve, protect and defend the Judeo-Christian values that made this the greatest country in history" - proclaimed last year that its top legislative priority would be "making permanent President Bush's 2001 federal tax cuts."

Similarly, a furor erupted last spring when it emerged that a Colorado jury had consulted the Bible before sentencing a killer to death. Experts debated whether the (Christian) jurors should have used an outside authority in their deliberations, and of course the Christian right saw it as one more sign of a secular society devaluing religion. But a more interesting question would have been why the jurors fixated on Leviticus 24, with its call for an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. They had somehow missed Jesus' explicit refutation in the New Testament: "You have heard that it was said, 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also."

And on and on. The power of the Christian right rests largely in the fact that they boldly claim religious authority, and by their very boldness convince the rest of us that they must know what they're talking about. They're like the guy who gives you directions with such loud confidence that you drive on even though the road appears to be turning into a faint, rutted track. But their theology is appealing for another reason too: it coincides with what we want to believe. How nice it would be if Jesus had declared that our income was ours to keep, instead of insisting that we had to share. How satisfying it would be if we were supposed to hate our enemies. Religious conservatives will always have a comparatively easy sell.

But straight is the path and narrow is the way. The gospel is too radical for any culture larger than the Amish to ever come close to realizing; in demanding a departure from selfishness it conflicts with all our current desires. Even the first time around, judging by the reaction, the Gospels were pretty

unwelcome news to an awful lot of people. There is not going to be a modern-day return to the church of the early believers, holding all things in common - that's not what I'm talking about. Taking seriously the actual message of Jesus, though, should serve at least to moderate the greed and violence that mark this culture. It's hard to imagine a con much more audacious than making Christ the front man for a program of tax cuts for the rich or war in Iraq. If some modest part of the 85 percent of us who are Christians woke up to that fact, then the world might change.

It is possible, I think. Yes, the mainline Protestant churches that supported civil rights and opposed the war in Vietnam are mostly locked in a dreary decline as their congregations dwindle and their elders argue endlessly about gay clergy and same-sex unions. And the Catholic Church, for most of its American history a sturdy exponent of a "love your neighbor" theology, has been weakened, too, its hierarchy increasingly motivated by a single-issue focus on abortion. Plenty of vital congregations are doing great good works - they're the ones that have nurtured me - but they aren't where the challenge will arise; they've grown shy about talking about Jesus, more comfortable with the language of sociology and politics. More and more it's Bible-quoting Christians, like Wallis's Sojourners movement and that Baptist seminary graduate Bill Moyers, who are carrying the fight.

The best-selling of all Christian books in recent years, Rick Warren's *The Purpose-Driven Life*, illustrates the possibilities. It has all the hallmarks of self-absorption (in one five-page chapter, I counted sixty-five uses of the word "you"), but it also makes a powerful case that we're made for mission. What that mission is never becomes clear, but the thirst for it is real. And there's no great need for Warren to state that purpose anyhow. For Christians, the plainspoken message of the Gospels is clear enough. If you have any doubts, read the Sermon on the Mount.

Admittedly, this is hope against hope; more likely the money changers and power brokers will remain ascendant in our "spiritual" life. Since the days of Constantine, emperors and rich men have sought to co-opt the teachings of Jesus. As in so many areas of our increasingly market-tested lives, the co-opters - the TV men, the politicians, the Christian "interest groups" - have found a way to make each of us complicit in that travesty, too. They have invited us to subvert the church of Jesus even as we celebrate it. With their help we have made golden calves of ourselves - become a nation of terrified, self-obsessed idols. It works, and it may well keep working for a long time to come. When Americans hunger for selfless love and are fed only love of self, they will remain hungry, and too often hungry people just come back for more of the same.

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