

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia
on Sunday, January 22, 1989, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

2 CHRONICLES 7:13-14

“If I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or if I command the locust swarms to eat up all of your crops, or if I send an epidemic among you; then, if My people will humble themselves, and pray, and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear them from heaven, and forgive their sins, and heal their land.”

THE STERN MERCY OF GOD

I'm sure you all watched at least some of the Inaugural proceedings this past Friday; the taking of the oaths of office by the President and the Vice President; and the Inaugural address by Mr. Bush. And no doubt you looked in by television on the President and the First Lady as they made their rounds that evening of the nine Inaugural Balls. As I watched the festivities, my mind went back to Election night 1980. The Washington Hilton was awash with blue balloons, white streamers, and red-faced Evangelicals floating through the ballrooms, sipping ginger ale and savoring victory. Men and women more accustomed to singing “My Jesus I love Thee” were now belting out “Happy Days are here again.” Between the Moral Majority and Ronald Reagan spiritual revival was on its way to our fair land! “Welcome to the Great Awakening of the 1980s” enthused one commentator.

Now, the sun has set on the Reagan years — and on the hopes of many politically active Evangelicals who, eight years ago, were quite euphoric about the future, bright with promise. However, despite unprecedented access to the Oval Office, most items on the Evangelical social agenda have been either defeated or shelved.

Advocates of prayer in the public schools have been left with nothing but the facetious remark of the President to the effect that “as long as there are math tests, children will pray in schools.” Courts have struck down even modest efforts to gain a moment of silence.

Hopes for a speedy reversal of Roe vs. Wade were dashed when Judge Robert Bork was chewed up by the pit bulls of the U. S. Senate. A powerful liberal coalition simply outgunned conservative lobbying groups. Though some progress has been made in curbing federal funding, abortions continue at the horrifying rate of 1.5 million per year.

On other fronts, the results have been no less frustrating. The anti-pornography campaign can claim a study commission, but no significant legislation. Despite zealous antidrug campaigns, crack and cocaine continue to kill our young people at an alarming rate, and these drugs contribute to the horrendous crime rate throughout the country. Government grants subsidizing 7.1 million children a year, nearly one-half of whom were born out of wedlock, may

be helping to erode the traditional family, while long-promised welfare reforms languish in the bureaucracy.

The A.C.L.U. has taken us to the cleaners on the judicial front. We may have a Christian in the White House, but that does not mean we can hang the Ten Commandments on a classroom wall. The process of expunging Christian symbols from public places -- all in the name of pluralism -- continues unabated in the courts.

But perhaps the most shocking failure of these past eight years has been the near tripling of the national debt, and the appalling trade deficit. Conservative Christians have been either unwilling or unable to exert the influence needed to restrain our nation's binge at the public trough -- immorally saddling our children and grandchildren with our horrendous debts.

Why, by the way, is the trade deficit so severe? Why, for example, does Japan buy far more goods from European nations than from the USA? Mainly because of the inferior quality of the manufactured commodities that we provide. And this is a somber indicator that something is eating into the moral fiber of the nation.

But the real test of political influence is often at the grass roots. And there we have seen an alarming erosion. Recently, Christian groups in Texas aggressively organized to oppose pari-mutuel betting. Here in Virginia conservatives united forces to defeat the lottery. Yet in both Bible Belt states the referenda passed overwhelmingly.

Such defeats have had a very sobering influence on many Christian leaders. One conceded, "Ten years ago many of us had the mistaken idea that we could turn the country around quickly." To give an example of how times have changed, we have only to think of Dr. Jerry Falwell, a shrewd architect of the conservative Christian political resurgence. He announced recently that he was leaving politics to return to his "first love," the pulpit.

Many attribute the evangelical decline to self-inflicted wounds; the moral failure of those like the television evangelists whose bad influence has greatly diminished public confidence, undoing in a few months all that had been gained in the past decade.

Some question whether there ever was a political mandate for the social legislation we sought. They would say that the issues that elected Mr. Reagan were the economy and inflation, and that the much-publicized "moral revolution" was largely the figment of wishful thinking.

But these are only partial explanations. And let me hasten to add that Ronald Reagan had a distinguished presidency. His foreign policy initiatives have unquestionably drawn us closer together in friendship with the Soviet Union; and our renewal of military strength has had a sobering influence upon all our potential enemies. And when a President leaves office with 68% of the people believing he has done a creditable job, that affirmation certainly speaks for itself.

The deeper reason for the evangelical movement's decline in political influence lies, I believe, in its failure from the beginning to grasp one basic truth, namely this — that it is impossible to effect genuine political, social and spiritual reform through legislation alone.

without at the same time working for the spiritual rebirth of the individual, and eventually of the nation, and the national character.

The Psalmist enunciated this truth so well when he said — “Do not put your trust in princes, in mortal men, who cannot save” (Psalm 146:3). And again, he said, “It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in princes.” (Psalm 118:9). That simply means that the Church of Jesus Christ must resist the tempting illusion that it can usher in the Kingdom of God through political means. A constant temptation throughout the Christian centuries has been the pressure to make religion a formula for refashioning political and economic restructures.

Our Lord, you remember, provided the best example for the Church, in His wilderness confrontation with Satan, when the Devil tempted Jesus to worship him and thus take dominion over the kingdoms of this world. And that was a strong temptation. Did you ever realize that with that kind of power Christ could enforce the Sermon on the Mount; love and justice could reign? But He would not compromise with evil in any shape or form.

And yet the most consistent heresy of the Church has been to succumb to the very temptation that Christ successfully defeated. In the Middle Ages this produced bloody Crusades and Inquisitions; in modern times, it has fostered a type of utopianism expressed in a stanza from one of William Blake’s most famous poems:

“I will not cease from mental flight,
Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand;
Till we have built Jerusalem
In England’s green and pleasant land.”

But all these “New Jerusalems” are earthly cities established by the will and power of man. And if we believe that the Kingdom of Heaven can be established by political power, then we can’t object if that same power lays claim to the whole of life and demands the total submission of the individual’s conscience: and that is the essence of totalitarianism.

This century’s social-gospel movement echoed Blake’s sentiments about the “New Jerusalem,” because it was a campaign to eliminate social injustice through governmental means. Objectives became political and economic to the detriment of the spiritual. The one great victory in our country in this generation has been the Civil Rights legislation, and we thank God for that. But by and large the reformers’ well-intentioned efforts were shattered as social programs failed to produce the promised utopia, leaving observers to conclude -- “Things are no better. Where is your God now?”

You know, of course, that it was the great 19th century British statesman and born-again Christian, William Wilberforce, who was the one man above all others, under God, who guided legislation through the British Parliament for the abolition of the slave trade throughout the British Empire. At the outset of his campaign for abolition, he wrote in his journal, “Almighty God has set before me two great objectives; the abolition of the slave trade and the reformation of manners.” Now by “the reformation of manners” he meant not table etiquette, but reforms in the widespread attitudes and values by which his countrymen actually lived -- reforms which

could be effected only by the spiritual rebirth of the nation.

John Wesley's long life of 88 years was drawing to a close as Wilberforce began his crusade. During his 50 years of evangelistic ministry, Wesley had been used of God to lead a spiritual revival that saw hundreds of thousands of people soundly converted by the grace of God: and these converts were Wilberforce's allies in his triumphant crusade for social justice.

Wilberforce thus worked on two fronts, battling the slave trade for 20 years in Parliament, and at the same time emphasizing the necessity for grassroots moral and spiritual revival in decadent British society. He knew that the standards of a people have direct public consequences: thus, real political changes cannot take place unless a nation's character supports them.

Such standards -- keeping the law, respecting human life and dignity, loving one's family, fighting, and if necessary dying for national goals, helping the unfortunate, sacrificing for the common good — all these depend directly on such individual virtues as courage, loyalty, charity, compassion, integrity and duty. And paradoxically, while government depends for its success on these elements of individual character, it is itself powerless to create them in its citizens.

If we continue to ignore this crucial truth we will continue to be frustrated, and conservative Christians will grow increasingly disillusioned. Many of them may pull out of politics and retreat to their cloisters, content with saving souls while the ship of state slowly sinks. Christians belong in the political arena, working for morality and justice in public policies, but without illusions. There are no quick fixes; politics alone cannot hope to change the character of this nation or of any nation.

So, we must dig in for the long haul -- and along with our political activities work for "a reformation of manners" -- a spiritual renewal of our people through the power which can come only from a personal encounter with Jesus Christ.

I believe with all my heart that renewal of the national life can take place only if and when there is renewal in the life of God's people -- the Church. I ask you this searching question — are Christians in America today radically different from the ungodly folk around them? We ought to be. Or are we like that strange little animal, the chameleon, that changes its color to suit the environment in which it finds itself?

Listen to God speaking to us through the text for this morning -- "If My people will humble themselves, and pray, and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear them from heaven, and forgive their sins, and heal their land."

King Solomon affirms in no uncertain terms that God's mercy is a stern mercy because it always upholds the reality of His moral standards. Our text outlines four things which God's people must do; in return for which God will do three things:

1. God's people must humble themselves. Webster defines the verb "to humble" as "to destroy the independence or prestige of." How independent we sometimes feel! The more affluent we become, the more we are tempted to believe that we have made it on our own! And

so, God calls us first of all to humility! What do we have that we have not been given? Apart from God's mercy and grace we could not draw a single breath.

St. Peter exhorts us -- "Humble yourselves therefore under God's mighty hand, that He may lift you up in due time." (1 Peter 5:6). That is a word to us as individuals and as a nation; for as Proverbs reminds us, "Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall." (Proverbs 16:18).

2. **We must pray**, asking God's blessing upon our land. Do you pray daily for the President and the Vice President, both committed Christians? Do you pray for your congressman and senators and all who labor in government? That could open the floodgates of blessing upon the nation, if 50 million born-again believers would engage in this daily ministry of intercession.

A godly pastor in Eastern Europe prayed every Sunday by name for the Communist President of his country; and the secret police who were present at every service heard him. When someone asked him why he prayed for this atheist, the pastor said —

- 1) "Because no one needs our prayers more: and
- 2) Because it reminds him that he is not God"!

3. **We must seek God's face**. Jesus said, "Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God." I can't see God's face if the "iron curtain" of sin is raised between Him and me.

4. **We must turn from our wicked ways**. God cannot bless a nation if Christians within the nation remain unrepentant and unforgiven. The turn must be one of 180°. That is what "repentance" in the Scripture means — a turning around, a loathing of the things in our lives that displease God — not the least of which is our unconcern about the state of the country.

And if we fulfil these conditions, what does God promise to do?

1. **He will hear us**. Isn't it awe-inspiring to realize that the Creator and Sustainer of the universe actually listens to your prayer and mine when we fulfil the conditions?

2. **He will forgive us** and set us a new course as individuals and as a nation; and

3. **He will heal our land** because of the moral integrity of His people within this country. We are told that there are 50 million born-again Christians in the USA today. What would God do if we truly cooperated with Him?

He would have saved the wicked city of Sodom if He had found ten righteous people there. But He couldn't find them. (Genesis 18:32—33). God saved the nation of Israel from destruction in the days of Elijah the prophet, because of the 7000 in Israel who had not bowed down to Baal, the heathen deity. God blesses a nation because of the godly and righteous minority within that nation -- the moral minority — Do you and I really want to be a part of that

moral minority? We can be if we humble ourselves, and pray, and seek God's face, and turn from our wicked ways.

I am convinced that the healing of these United States of America depends upon the faithfulness of God's own people who will truly obey His Word.

So, let our prayer this morning and every morning be —

“Lord, send revival, and let it begin in me.”

AMEN.