

Against the Wind: Being a Christian in America After Obergefell  
An Exhortation  
July 5, 2015  
Pastor Rich Lusk

Yesterday was July 4, American Independence Day. In a lot of places, scheduled fireworks celebrations were rained out, and maybe that's a mercifully appropriate symbol for how we should view our country right now. These are interesting times for American Christians (in the sense of that apocryphal Chinese curse: "May you live in interesting times!"). Many Americans feel they no longer live in the country in which they were born. It is hard to be patriotic when so many anti-Christian trends are dominating American culture. It's hard for us to feel at home.

That's not an altogether bad thing. Our true home, after all, is not America but the new creation, the kingdom of Christ. This is the land of our sojourn, and God has made no special promises to uphold or bless America. How, then, should we look at the tectonic shifts that have taken place under our feet?

First, there can be no doubt that our nation has a Christian heritage. There is a lot of confusion over what it means to claim that America is, or once was, a "Christian nation." I'm not concerned about the particulars of that debate at the moment, in part because defining exactly what counts as a "Christian nation" is a complex issue. What should be beyond all reasonable doubt is that Christian faith exerted a tremendous influence on the rising and shaping of our republic. The very concept of a Constitutional republic grows out of the Bible. The rule of law, representative government, the legitimacy of civil disobedience, the doctrine of the lesser magistrate – all critical ingredients in our War for Independence – were bequeathed to us by Reformational Christian faith. In fact, one might say that America not only has a Christian heritage, but a specifically Presbyterian heritage, as several well known anecdotes bear out. In many ways, the tensions that eventually erupted into the War for Independence were just another phase in a longstanding political and theological struggle between Presbyterians and the established church of England. For example, the British commonly referred to the War for Independence as "the Presbyterian rebellion." John Knox, whose fingerprints are all over the colonial secession, would be quite happy to hear it called such. We all know the colonists were motivated a by trampling of their rights as British citizens – taxation without representation – but another issue that drove the colonists to separate from England was the very legitimate fear that the King would appoint a Anglican bishopric over the colonies, which was the very thing they had fled to America to escape. When the fighting broke out in New England, Horace Walpole, a member of Parliament said, "There is no good crying about it. Cousin America has run off with the Presbyterian parson." The parson in view was John Witherspoon, who not only shepherded a congregation but also served as the President of the College of New Jersey, and as such trained a number of the men would go on to become prominent in the founding of our country. Witherspoon was the only clergyman to sign the

Declaration of Independence but certainly not the only clergyman who played a role in bringing it to pass. Witherspoon and other Presbyterian ministers were known to the British as the “black robed regiment” (Presbyterian pastors wore black Genevan gowns at that time) because their sermons and writings did so much to stir up a desire of independence, along with producing a theological justification for the movement. Perhaps the most important figure in America’s independence movement lived in the generation before the war, George Whitefield. If George Washington is the “Father” America, perhaps Whitefield should be considered our national “Grandfather.” It would be almost impossible to overstate the influence Whitefield and the “Great Awakening” had on colonial America. Certainly the religious makeup of the Colonial army was largely due to immigration patterns, but the impact of the Great Awakening must also be reckoned with. About half of the soldiers and officers who fought in George Washington’s army were Presbyterian, and about three fourths were Calvinists of some sort. When Cornwallis surrendered at Yorktown, all but one of Washington’s colonels in the Colonial army was Presbyterian. That gives you a small glimpse of where came from.

Obviously a lot has happened between then and now. Telling the tale of America’s ups and downs over the last 250 years or so is far beyond what I can do here. The point I want to make is simple: Presbyterians, and Reformed theology, profoundly shaped American culture from the beginning, but that influence seems to have nearly run dry. To be sure, there were many, many shortcomings in America from the beginning. Christians in our land have often bought into and supported the wrong kind of American exceptionalism, conflating the global and historical role of the American nation with the church. Race based slavery (especially the slave trade itself) was a contradiction of America’s founding principles and is a stain on our national history we still have not gotten over. We have had our fair share of political and cultural corruption to contend with. But, still, there can be no doubt that America was influenced more deeply and broadly by genuine Christian faith than any other nation in history, at least for such an extended period of time. Lord willing, one day in the future God’s people will once again exert a tremendous influence on our culture. But that day is not today.

Thus, we have a number of challenges in front of us. Most Christians in most parts of the world today are very accustomed to these challenges. For most of us in America today, they are unprecedented. For much of our nation’s history America was a homey place for Christians. We had the wind at our backs, filling our sails, making the Christian life seem almost effortless and second-nature at times. But now the wind is in our faces. What does it mean for us as we try to sail against the wind? How can we navigate the strong headwinds?

The best thing we can do for America is simply live as faithful Christians. The greatest need in America right now is not for a reinvigorated patriotism or a renewed call to political activism, but for the church to be the church – the faithful and holy covenant community. The church’s relationship to the culture is always fluid and dynamic, not fixed and static. At the present moment, a faithful church in

America is going to increasingly be viewed as and function as a kind of counter-culture. This does not mean withdrawal from the culture – Christians in their various vocations will still engage in every aspect of our nation’s culture. But it does mean that as we walk in step with the Spirit, we will be more and more out of step with the spirit of the age. There will be consequences, many of them painful, and we best learn how to suffer faithfully sooner rather than later. No doubt, we can learn a great deal from looking at how other successful counter-cultural minorities have historically kept their identity in tact and brought about substantial cultural transformation, such as the church in Rome during the first four centuries of the Christian era.

You have heard me teach the we must understand the church in three dimensions – the church is a culture (with her own way of life, her own symbols, stories and ethics), the church is a counter-culture (witnessing to and for and against the world, as the gospel of Christ requires, forming a contrast society with the worldliness of world), and the church is the transformer of culture (bringing the life of the heavenly kingdom to earth more and more, thus discipling the nations and forming Christeddom). In a post-*Obergefell* America, it is especially our role as a counter-culture that will come to the forefront. All three dimensions are always relevant, but in certain contexts one of the dimensions becomes more prominent. Living as a counter-culture requires courage and wisdom.

If our calling is to be a faithful counter-culture, living as God’s holy people, holding out the Word of life in a crooked and perverse generation, what does it mean? Where do we start? Being a faithful, counter-cultural church starts with worship. Worship is ultimately the engine that drives transformation – personal transformation, familial transformation, and even national transformation. Doing the liturgy reinforces our identity and, indeed, our oddness, as Christians. In worship we pledge allegiance to a different king, we proclaim a different way of life, and we put our hope in a different empire. We learn the true meaning of words like freedom and justice. Our preaching tells a story that counters the current American narrative of ever increasing “progress.” Our hymns celebrate an alternative kingdom – one that comes through a cross. And in the offertory and Eucharist, we form an alternative ethos and economics. In short, change in America – the kind of change we really need – will not flow out of the ballot box or the Capitol building or the White House. It will flow out of the sanctuary, where God’s people gather for worship.