

How Should We Treat the First Amendment?

“Give thanks to the LORD, call on His name; make known His deeds among the peoples.”
(1 Chronicles 16:8, Modern English Version)

This month our nation celebrates Independence Day on the day that the *Declaration of Independence* was officially accepted by the Continental Congress in 1776. In the years following, independence from Great Britain would be accomplished, and the Constitution of the United States would be hammered out and eventually accepted by the states on differing dates throughout the late 1780's. The first ten amendments (often referred to as the Bill of Rights) were ratified a little later. And while the Fourth of July technically isn't a commemoration of the United States Constitution, yet we recall and rejoice in all our liberties on Independence Day.

I find it interesting that the first item mentioned in the very First Amendment in the Bill of Rights deals with religious freedom. Like others, I have a hard time thinking that this is coincidental. For the First Amendment begins: *“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof....”* And since then there has been plenty of discussion surrounding the interpretation of the words “establishment of religion” and of the words “prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” So, what ought we as Christians do with the First Amendment?

Well, I believe that first and foremost we ought to take to heart what King David wrote in 1 Chronicles 16. Although responding to a very different situation in a very different time and place, David's words that I quote at the top of the article are relevant to us. For after ***“they brought in the ark of God, [and] placed it in the midst of the tent that David had erected for it”*** (1 Chronicles 16:1, Modern English Version), ***“on that day then, David delivered for the first time this psalm of thanksgiving to the LORD into the hand of Asaph and his brothers”*** (1 Chronicles 16:7, Modern English Version). And the first verse says: ***“Give thanks to the LORD, call on His name; make known His deeds among the peoples.”*** And those who regularly pray the psalms (as we have been doing together this year at St. John's and St. Paul's) know that these words are also the first verse of Psalm 105. For ***“this psalm”*** (1 Chronicles 16:7, Modern English Version) in 1 Chronicles 16 is spread out among three psalms in the Psalter. A part of it is found in the first section of Psalm 105. A part of it comprises most all of Psalm 96. And a small part of it can be read in the first verse and in the last two verses of Psalm 106.

My friends, I believe that as Christians we should rejoice and support what it says in our First Amendment. The liberty to openly confess and practice our Christian faith truly is a blessing. And while some Americans may disagree, I firmly believe that prohibiting the state from establishing the religion of the nation is a good thing. And although I'm no longer able to ask them, I highly suspect that the charter members of our church body would also agree. Government interference with religion is what motivated these German Lutherans to move to the United States. For something called the Prussian Union of Churches had been “established” in the 19th century German empire by the king. And while its aim was to bring unity between Lutherans and Reformed Protestants, yet it forced Lutherans to make changes – including how they practiced the Lord's Supper. Some faithful Lutherans were unwilling to tolerate this state interference in the church – interference that was telling them to do something that was against their conscience and

against correct Biblical doctrine. So they decided to come to the United States where they would be free to practice their religion as they wished.

See, those who would like to have the government more actively promoting religion in America ought to be careful in regards to what they are wishing. For this is a knife that slices in more than one direction. And I can't imagine that confessional Lutherans today, who are a small minority in the United States, would be any more content with the government establishing and controlling the nation's religion than were the German forefathers of our church body in the 19th century. For the U.S. constitution doesn't even define the identity of God – in fact, words like “God” or “Bible” or “Jesus” or even “church” don't appear in our Constitution. Yet, such a constitution didn't prevent those fleeing their German homeland in the mid-19th century from settling here and forming a new confessional Lutheran church body. They willingly did so because they recognized the great blessing of religious liberty.

See, the forefathers of what today is called the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod were grateful for the First Amendment and rejoiced in it. And while the church does not need constitutional laws that guarantee freedom of expression in order to carry out her mission to ***“go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation”*** (Mark 16:15, ESV), yet we can and ought to be thankful when we are able to proclaim Christ without the threat of censorship or persecution. Nevertheless, be it in a free society like the United States of America or be it in a deeply restrictive, repressive, and closed society like North Korea, the Gospel can still bring forgiveness, salvation, and life because the Holy Spirit penetrates hearts through His Word no matter where those hearts may reside on this planet.

So, this month and every month, let us ***“give thanks to the LORD, call on His name; make known His deeds among the peoples.”*** For we have so very much to be thankful for as Christians living in America. Let us, though, neither take our freedom for granted nor irresponsibly waste this precious opportunity that the Lord has given to us. For it's easy to succumb to laziness and indifference when given liberty. But the Christian is never free to ignore God or His Word (nor to grossly circumvent or reinvent His Word as so many sickeningly do). The First Amendment allows for a plethora of false teaching to roam freely among us. Therefore, the church is to be as vigilant as ever in a free society. But we have the truth of Christ crucified and risen – a message that creates faith, absolves sins, and gives everlasting life. In the market place of ideas and religions, no competitor can come even close to replicating God's Word. So, looking at the First Amendment, the Christian rejoices at the opportunity to freely tell others the Good News of Jesus Christ – we ***“give thanks to the LORD, call on His name; make known His deeds among the peoples.”***

In Christ,
Pastor

Psalm Readings for July

WEEK ONE: Saturday, July 01; PSALM 6; Sunday, July 02; PSALM 7; Monday, July 03; PSALM 8; Tuesday, July 04; PSALM 9; Wednesday, July 05; PSALM 10; Thursday, July 06; PSALM 11; Friday, July 07 ; PSALM 12; Saturday, July 08; PSALM 13

WEEK TWO: Sunday, July 09; PSALM 14; Monday, July 10; PSALM 15; Tuesday, July 11; PSALM 16; Wednesday, July 12; PSALM 17; Thursday, July 13; PSALM 18:1-29; Friday, July 14; PSALM 18:30-50; Saturday, July 15; PSALM 19

WEEK THREE: Sunday, July 16; PSALM 20; Monday, July 17; PSALM 21; Tuesday, July 18; PSALM 22; Wednesday, July 19; PSALM 23; Thursday, July 20; PSALM 24; Friday, July 21; PSALM 25; Saturday, July 22; PSALM 26

WEEK FOUR: Sunday, July 23; PSALM 27; Monday, July 24; PSALM 28; Tuesday, July 25; PSALM 29; Wednesday, July 26; PSALM 30; Thursday, July 27; PSALM 31; Friday, July 28; PSALM 32; Saturday, July 29; PSALM 33

WEEK FIVE: Sunday, July 30; PSALM 34; Monday, July 31; PSALM 35:1-18; Tuesday, August 01; PSALM 35:19-28; Wednesday, August 02; PSALM 36; Thursday, August 03; PSALM 37:1-19; Friday, August 04; PSALM 37:20-40; Saturday, August 05; PSALM 38