"What Makes America a Christian Nation?"
Jeremiah 31: 31-34/ II Corinthians 3: 12-18

The Reverend Robert M. Knight, D. Min.
Pastor, First Christian Church, Charleston, SC

Since we are, in these days, celebrating our nation's birthday—even on this day, no less, when we find ourselves "in church"--the title I've given to this sermon: "What Makes America a Christian Nation?" It seems not in-appropriate.

Except that anytime anyone refers to whomever or whatever as "Christian," it's important to ask what the term—"Christian"—what it means. Since, depending on whom you're asking, to call someone or something "Christian"—it can mean lots of different things.

Here's what I mean. It comes from the New Testament lesson (which I just read), where Paul declares: "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty (there is freedom)."

To explain more fully what I'm suggesting in this sermon, however, I need to first invite you to join me in a brief history lesson; as it were, something of a "Reader's Digest version" of how the First Amendment to our nation's Constitution—how it came about. Since what I'm proposing— my "answer," if you will, to this question I have raised today, "What Makes America a Christian Nation?"—it involves a "remarkable irony," not only in our nation's history, but in "Christian history" as well.

It starts, in fact, in the 4th century of the "Christian era"--the year 312 to be precise—when the Roman Emporer, Constantine, when he was converted to "Christian faith" and subsequently proclaimed Christianity (or at least "his version" thereof); he proclaimed Christianity to be the "official religion" of the Roman Empire. What had heretofore been a marginalized, often persecuted, minority-status religion in the greater Mediterranean world, extending westward into Europe: it now took on "institutionalized forms" of expression that would characterize Christianity for the next thousand years.

As to whether the integrity of "Christian faith and practice" was sustained—much less, enhanced —as an increasingly "institutionalized expression" of religion during the succeeding Dark and Middle Ages (the years 500 to 1500)—that seems hardly debatable.

Since what emerged in the following 16th and 17th centuries was (what is known as) the "Protestant Reformation," associated most notably, of course, with Germany's Martin Luther, and his younger French counterpart, John Calvin.

The purpose of the Reformation was, obviously, a revolt against the "institutionalized excesses" (including the theological corruption and moral laxity) of the Roman Catholic Church.

Not that the Reformation would necessarily avert its own forms of scandal. Most notably, that associated with the English monarch, Henry VIII, and his mysoginistic relations with assorted wives and mistresses, including his seeking an annulment from his first wife, Catherine of Aragon, which resulted in the creation of what would become the Church of England.

Or, tragically, surely the darkest day in "Presbyterian history" (October 27, 1553): when the brilliant Spanish physician, Michael Servetus—when he was "burned at the stake" in Geneva, Switzerland, by followers of John Calvin. Servetus' crime? He was a Unitarian, praying as he died to Jesus as "the son of the eternal God," rather than "the eternal son of God."

You may have noticed. If humbly seeking to be merely "a person" of Christian faith; if that isn't morally ambiguous enough; when it comes to "Christian institutions"—including whatever particular expression of "the Church" (including church-related schools) ; much less, so-called "Christian" states or nations or cities (like, for instance, Calvin's Geneva)—"institutionalized Christianity" is indeed fraught with even greater moral peril.

Unless . . . unless whatever the institution calling itself "Christian"; unless it is characterized by Paul's sterling declaration of faith in our New Testament lesson today: "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty (there is freedom)." For indeed, authentic "Christian faith"—it is never coercive; if it isn't free—it isn't "Christian."

Which raises, of course, the "remarkable irony" (as I pronounced it earlier): the "irony" of how America might be considered a "Christian nation."

This invites yet another abbreviated version of "Christian history"—in this case, an American addition--beginning with the Pilgrims perilously crossing the Atlantic from England to the shores of Massachusetts in 1620. Morphing into something of a caricature known as "Puritans," these scrupulously religious devotees--they were protesting a Church of England they considered ostentatious.

Except in their zeal to protect their own "religious freedom," the Puritans just as zealously denied that same "freedom" to others who held a different (however slight?) religious perspective. As in, for example, the scandalous "Salem Witch Trials." Or their banishing of the Baptist, Roger Williams, from Massachusetts; Williams subsequently founding the neighboring state of Rhode Island.

By contrast, our own state—South Carolina—our state was originally established, not for religious purposes, but rather as a business venture, that of the Lord's Proprietors. Consequently, South Carolina, our state has historically promoted religious freedom, such that Charleston today features the oldest Baptist Church in the South located not far from the oldest Reform Synagogue in America; both Baptists and Jews thriving here in South Carolina since the 17th century.

The French Heugenot Church (the only such "active Heugenot congregation" in America today): it stands only a few blocks from the Roman Catholic Cathedral; an interesting historical irony indeed, considering that the Heugenots (such as the Ravenels and the Galliards, historically

prominent families in Charleston), the Huegenots were Protestants who escaped persecution from the Catholic "state church" in 17th century France by immigrating here, to South Carolina.

First (Scots) Presbyterian Church and the Unitarian Church in Charleston (the former, more conservative; the latter, more liberal): in the 18th century, these historic congregations both grew out of the Circular Congregational Church, which was founded in the previous century in dissent from the Anglicans who dominated religious life in the Lowcountry in the Colonial era.

Not to mention the Lutherans and the Methodists who emerged here in the Carolinas, as well, in the 18th century. Methodists being merely a renewal movement in the Church of England; a movement led by the famous Wesley brothers, John and Charles, and their American counterpart, Francis Asbury. With Lutherans developing prominently, not just in Charleston, but notably here in the South Carolina Midlands, particularly the Dutch Fork area west of Columbia.

As for other expressions of early American Christianity, the more liberal and least institutionalized Quakers (most prominent in Pennsylvania), they appeared here in the Carolinas in the late 17th century and proceeded to protest slavery more than a hundred years before the Civil War. While Orthodoxy, the religion primarily of Greek immigrants, it appears in South Carolina history somewhat later, in the early 20th century.

The state of Virginia, with the establishment of Jamestown in 1607, it was not unlike South Carolina, in that Virginia was founded, as well, not as a venture in so-called "religious freedom"; rather, Virginia represented an English commercial endeavor.

Except that in Virginia, the Church of England was "established" as the "state church" and therefore discriminated against Baptists and Methodists and Presbyterians and other non-Anglicans. Including the taxing of such folk to financially support a church which, otherwise, they did not support.

Enter the two most prominent Virginia statesmen of the 18th century: the younger James Madison and his mentor, Thomas Jefferson, each of whom would, of course, subsequently become president of our young nation. Jefferson was (following George Washington and John Adams) our third president, and Madison succeeded him.

It was, in fact, Madison, under Jefferson's influence, who authored (in 1785) the important document which denied the Church of England preferential legal and economic status in colonial Virginia; a document entitled (in classic 18th century English diction) "Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments."

Just as Jefferson and Madison would later most influence the creation of the First Amendment (among the Bill of Rights) to our nation's Constitution; an Amendment ratified in 1791.

The First Amendment does, of course, ensure us, as American citizens: it ensures us either "freedom of or from religion." And it does so by the creation of a "non-establishment clause." Which means that no religion—even Christianity, or any particular expression thereof—no religion (even religion itself) is granted privileged status in our national life.

Neither Jefferson nor Madison were "conventional Christians" by any stretch of the imagination. Even though Madison was educated at Princeton, under the influence of the esteemed Scottish Presbyterian, John Witherspoon, Madison became something of a skeptic along the way, remaining an Episcopalian in name and social standing only.

Whereas Jefferson, the personification of 18th century Deism, the so-called "Enlightenment," a free-thinking, scientifically-oriented secular humanist; in the presidential election of 1800 (which was characterized by extreme and divisive religious fervor) Jefferson was caricatured as "anything but a Christian," in contrast to his more religiously conventional Unitarian opponent, John Adams. Alexander Hamilton even called Jefferson "an atheist," and Jefferson's other political opponents alarmed voters by claiming that if he were elected president, Jefferson would confiscate their Bibles.

Besides a "wall of separation" between church and state--a graphic image which Jefferson, as president, which he employed in an 1801 letter of support to the concerns of an association of Connecticut Baptists—or Jefferson's own editing of the New Testament, most of which he eliminated, reducing our seminal document of Christian faith to only the "ethical precepts" of Jesus found in the Gospels; Jefferson's "religious views" are perhaps best revealed in these famous lines (from his 1785 book, *Notes on the State of Virginia*). Said Thomas Jefferson: "It does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty gods, or no god. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg."

So here's the "punch line" to what I'm proposing today. I've said it twice already—this "remarkable irony" which I think best defines America as a "Christian nation." It comes from Paul's "declaration of faith" in our New Testament lesson: "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty (there is freedom)." Authentic "Christian faith"—it is never coercive—for if it isn't free, it isn't "Christian."

Speaking of ironies, neither Thomas Jefferson nor James Madison (nor, for that matter, most of the other "founding fathers" of our nation, whom I have not referenced; such as, for instance, George Washington or Benjamin Franklin—or even later, Abraham Lincoln); other than a general concern for the country's morale and morality, none of these men—and certainly Jefferson and Madison—they were hardly interested in promoting, in our nation, the kind of "Christian faith" to which I am (and, I suspect, most of you are) so deeply devoted.

Yet, in rejecting any expression of "established religion" (or even religion itself) here in America —in other words, in creating the First Amendment to our nation's Constitution—our "founding fathers" thereby ensured "freedom of or from religion" to each of us . . . and to all of us . . . as citizens of this great nation.

It is nothing less than a "freedom" inherent to the kind of authentic Christian faith Paul is proclaiming when he declares: "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty (there is freedom)."

Is that not a gift worth celebrating on this, the eve of our nation's 240th birthday?