

Freedom or Nationalism? Caleb J. Lines, 7-09-2026

Two hundred and fifty years ago, representatives of thirteen colonies signed the Declaration of Independence, articulating an audacious vision: that governments derive "their just powers from the consent of the governed" and that all people possess certain inalienable rights. Milestone anniversaries such as this invite more than celebration; they invite reflection. They ask us not only to commemorate our history, but to examine whether we have remained faithful to the ideals that inspired it.

Unfortunately, much of the public celebration surrounding America's 250th anniversary has pointed in a different direction. Rather than inviting thoughtful reflection on the nation's democratic experiment, many commemorations have blurred the line between patriotism and partisanship. Some religious leaders have gone further still, portraying the United States as a nation uniquely chosen by God. Earlier this year, the "Rededicate 250" prayer gathering on the National Mall called Americans to "give thanks for God's providence, reflect on our nation's story, and rededicate America as One Nation under God." It is a stirring phrase, but one that obscures more than it reveals. "Under God" appears neither in the Declaration of Independence nor in the Constitution. The words were added to the Pledge of Allegiance in 1954 during the Cold War, reflecting the anxieties of the Red Scare rather than the intentions of the nation's founders.

That distinction matters because the United States was never established as a Christian nation. It was founded as a constitutional republic committed to religious liberty precisely because the government would neither establish nor privilege a particular faith. Many of the leading architects of the American experiment—including Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Paine, and Ethan Allen—identified with, or were heavily influenced by, Deism. Others, including George Washington, James Madison, and John Adams, reflected many of its assumptions. Deists generally believed that God created the universe and endowed it with order and natural law, but did not understand God to be directing the daily affairs of governments or selecting political leaders for divine purposes. Whether or not one shares their theology, this worldview profoundly shaped the constitutional order they created. Political authority would not rest on claims of divine appointment, but on the consent of the governed.

That commitment is reflected clearly in the opening words of the First Amendment: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." Notice what the amendment does. It limits government. The Establishment Clause prevents the state from creating or endorsing a national religion, while the Free Exercise Clause protects every person's right to practice—or not practice—a faith according to conscience. These protections belong equally to Christians, Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, atheists, agnostics, and everyone else. Religious liberty only works when government remains neutral. Once the state begins privileging one religion over another—whether through official endorsements, religious displays in government

institutions, or declarations that America is fundamentally Christian—it undermines the very constitutional principles that make genuine religious freedom possible.

Of course, constitutional arguments rarely persuade those convinced that the Bible teaches otherwise. For many advocates of Christian nationalism, the preferred proof text is Romans 13: "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except from God..." Few biblical passages have been quoted more frequently—or more selectively. Throughout history, these verses have been used to defend monarchy, slavery, segregation, fascism, family separation, and authoritarian rule. More recently, they have been invoked to suggest that political leaders possess divine legitimacy simply because they hold power. Such readings, however, ignore both Paul's historical context and the larger witness of Scripture.

Paul was not writing a timeless political philosophy for democratic societies. He was writing to a small and vulnerable Christian community living under the shadow of the Roman Empire. These believers possessed no political influence. They were not organizing campaigns or seeking control of government; they were simply trying to survive. Paul also believed that Christ's return was imminent. He expected God's reign to break into history within his own lifetime. His concern was therefore pastoral rather than constitutional: How could this fragile community remain faithful long enough to witness what he believed God was about to accomplish? Read in that context, Romans 13 is not an endorsement of empire but practical counsel for an oppressed minority navigating a dangerous political reality.

Paul never suggests that Caesar is morally righteous, nor does he argue that imperial power reflects God's perfect will. His ultimate allegiance remains where it always was—with the Reign of God. That larger biblical story consistently places God's justice above the demands of empire. Pharaoh is not the hero of Exodus. Caesar is not the hero of the Gospels. The Beast is not the hero of Revelation. Again and again, Scripture reminds us that faithfulness sometimes requires resisting systems that perpetuate oppression rather than sanctifying them. Political authority is never, by itself, evidence of divine approval. The measure of any government is not whether it claims God's blessing, but whether it advances justice, protects the vulnerable, and upholds the dignity of every human being.

As America marks its 250th anniversary, perhaps the most patriotic act is neither unquestioning celebration nor cynical dismissal. It is honest reflection. We can celebrate the remarkable ideals articulated in the Declaration of Independence while acknowledging how often the nation has fallen short of them. We can cherish religious liberty without confusing Christianity with nationalism. And we can remember that the church's calling has never been to baptize political power, but to proclaim God's vision of justice, mercy, humility, and peace. If this anniversary is to mean anything, may it not simply commemorate the nation we have been. May it renew our commitment to becoming the nation—and the people—we still aspire to be.

~ Rev. Dr. Caleb J. Lines

About the Author

Rev. Dr. Caleb J. Lines is an ordained minister with standing in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the United Church of Christ. He has a passion for pursuing social justice for the marginalized, demonstrating the Good News of God's radically inclusive love, and proclaiming a relevant message for today's ever-changing world. He currently serves as the Senior Minister of University Christian Church in San Diego, the Co-Executive Director of Progressive Christianity.org, and Co-Host of the podcast "The Moonshine Jesus Show." Caleb is the author of *The Great Digital Commission: Embracing Social Media for Church Growth and Transformation* and *Awakened: A 52-Week Devotional*. His views on the intersection of religion and public life have been featured in diverse national publications. Visit his website at calebjlines.com.