

# ‘America is great because America is good’ can be true

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In Old Testament times, altars were built frequently for various reasons – to make sacrifices, to commemorate an important event and to serve as reminders to people who needed to remember who they were.

Some altars were a simple pile of stones that were left in place, and others were more elaborate, but in all cases the altars served as a visible and permanent message or for a spiritual function.

For example, when Moses had delivered the commandments of God to the Israelites, and they were about to cross the Jordan River into the Promised Land, God commanded Moses to build an altar of large stones and to cover them with plaster, writing God’s commandments in the plaster to remind them of his instructions.

God then told Moses to build another altar out of uncut stones to be used for a burnt offering.

Altars were common among all people of that day, including pagans. They were so common that there are over 400 mentions of altars in the Bible.

Several years ago, I was involved in a ministry in Swaziland, a small African country next to South Africa. The ministry not only took the gospel there, but also taught people, including children, how to garden. That was especially important because AIDS had reduced the adult population by so much that the average head of household was only twelve years old.

The Muslims were also there to spread their beliefs, but they had a different tactic. Their plan was to build mosques at a rate of about one per every five square miles, even in places where there were no Muslims. In addition, they advertised that they would provide children with an education through high school, free of charge, if they or their parents would do only one thing – change their last name to Mohammed. Conversion to their religion was not necessary, only the name change.

Why? Because they knew that if a child grew up seeing mosques all around them and if their last name was Mohammed, they would conclude that they were Muslims.

Altars are, among other things, symbols of things that are important. The Temple in Jerusalem was a symbol of God's presence and until Jesus came, it was a place where He appeared. It was a place like no other, but after it had been destroyed and the Israelites had been taken into captivity, it laid in disrepair for many years. When the Israelites returned from Babylon, they began to rebuild their own homes, but neglected to rebuild the Temple. They also struggled with poverty, poor crops and low productivity.

In the first chapter of the book of Haggai, the prophet Haggai delivered a simple message to the Israelites. "Why are you living in luxurious homes while my house lies in ruins...Look at what is happening to you! You have planted much but harvest little. You eat but are not satisfied. You drink but are still thirsty. You put on clothes but cannot keep warm. Your wages disappear as though you were putting them in pockets filled with holes!"

In the second chapter, God says through Haggai, "Does anyone remember this house – this Temple – in its former splendor? How, in comparison, does it look to you now? It must seem like nothing at all!" It had been so many years since the people had seen what the Temple looked like that they didn't know how to rebuild it.

All over the world, church buildings are disappearing. In Europe, churches are being converted to mosques. In America, church buildings are being swallowed up with urbanism, in some cases being prohibited to build or being forced to build so that their buildings are unrecognizable as a church. The cross is being attacked as an offensive symbol of an offensive religion, and the time is coming soon that to place a cross on a church will be illegal.

And America is suffering for it – her productivity is down, her economy is in shambles, her industries have left her, and much of the country is covered with drought. Even if it were not a message from God, it is an eerie reminder of an earlier time when the Israelites were in the same predicament.

But America was not always that way, and doesn't have to turn its back on God.

In the 1830s, after seeing churches in America, Alexis deTocqueville said of America, "America is great because America is good. And if America ceases to be good, America will cease to be great."

Yes, the church is not a building, it's the Christians who occupy it, but the church building is a powerful and symbolic reminder of who we are and what we are to be. The church is worth saving.

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