
Is God on our Side

A few weeks ago I began to think about the phrase, “God is on our side.” I have mentioned this a few times in a blog or sermon, but I thought it might be good to flesh it out a bit. Let’s consider two statements: “God is on our side” and “We are on God’s side.” There is a very big difference between these two statements.

Let’s consider a hockey team. The team happens to be made up of all Christian young men who desire to serve the Lord. Their chaplain comes into the dressing room half an hour before the game begins, and he spends a little time in devotions and prayer. As he talks with the players, they begin to talk as if they, an unashamedly Christian team playing against teams which are not overtly Christian, should win because God is on their side. They reason that if God had to pick teams, he should pick theirs, and because he is able, he should also give them the win. How should the chaplain respond?

The chaplain could easily respond by agreeing with the team, and he could pray for a win. A win, after all, would witness to the fact that God is on their side. It would be a testimony to the other teams that faith in God is justified and that others should put their faith in him as well. The chaplain could say that, but he would be treading on dangerous ground. What if his team did not win? What if the team did win but cheated and played unfairly to do so? How would that be a witness to who God is? Right before the game might not be the time, but it would seem that in the next little while the chaplain would have some work in helping the team understand that their belief that God was on their side has some problems.

There is a bigger problem. When we say that God is on our side, who is setting the agenda, the priorities, the values? We are. We define the side, what it looks like, and what its goals are. We set the agenda, and we expect that God conform himself to our agenda. But would God agree? Would he say, “I am fully supportive of this team/nation/organization, and I will enable them to succeed, thus witnessing that I am on their side”? I expect not because God is not in the business of providing support for our agendas. He does not conform himself to what we want to do. To think that is to get it backward.

The chaplain, as he meets with the team, would have to tell them that God is not on their side. God’s plan may not be for them to win the game or the championship. God might have another agenda, one that does not include their being successful in the way they hope to be. The chaplain would then have to explain that we should not expect so much that God is on our side as we should be on his.

When we consider what God’s side might be with respect to a hockey game, we would say that the players, who are his children, should behave in an appropriate way. They should play with all their hearts, using the skills God gave to them. At the same time, they should keep their emotions in check. They should obey the rules and not take cheap shots. Perhaps, if an opposing player made a particularly good play that resulted in a goal, they might commend him for his good work. (That would be hard to do, of course.) The chaplain would explain that God desires that we do things according to his will, and that we live as is appropriate for a follower of Jesus Christ. We are called to be witnesses to God, and not he to us.

When we say that God is on our side, we set the agenda, but when we say that we are on God's side, we recognize that he is setting the agenda. That means that if we are truly on his side, we will conform ourselves to his priorities, values, and will. We will live and act in a way that pleases him.

To do that, of course, we have to know what God's will is, and we can find that in Scripture. The Sermon on the Mount, found in Matthew 5-7 contains a fairly extensive summary of what it means to be on God's side. Loving our enemies, living pure lives, being witnesses to the world, and so much more are examples of what being on God's side looks like. Whatever we find ourselves doing, we should do so with the desire to follow Jesus. To be on God's side means that we witness to who he is. We want to make God known to the world, and we do not expect God to make us known by helping us win the game.

Perhaps one of the most egregious times in the history of Christianity occurred about 1000 years ago when the Christian church in Europe, claiming that God was on its side, sent soldiers (along with a goodly number of rabble-rousing tag-alongs) to "the Holy Land" to liberate Jerusalem from the infidels, those without faith (as they defined them). When they said that God was on their side, they also took the liberty of committing atrocities (pillaging, burning, killing, and raping) because, they said, they were doing the Lord's work. That century or so during with the crusades took place is remembered as a black mark against the church by Christians and non-Christians alike.

In contrast, we think of the early church which was experiencing persecution going to the poor and needy and sick, providing them with support, help, and healing. Among the pagan Romans it was remarked that Christians were different, for they helped others rather than participating in the Roman way of taking from others. Their witness was truly remarkable as they conformed themselves to the ways of the Lord, offering themselves to serve others. They saw themselves as being on God's side, helping others, and not he on theirs, fighting against persecution and oppression.

We must be very careful how we speak and what we think. Although we do find the words, "The Lord is on our side," in Scripture (Psalm 124:1, not the best translation in the NIV), we recognize that this verse does not mean that David, the psalmist thought that God was on his side. Rather, he understood that God was with him to support him, a better translation of the Hebrews. David, never for an instance, believed that God was on his side; rather, he sought to do things God's way, and was declared to be a man after God's own heart.

If we declare that God is on our side, we are putting ourselves in God's place and he in ours. If, however, we seek to be on his side, we are recognizing that he is God, and because of that, we seek to do his will and live as a follower of Jesus Christ should.

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