The Gettysburg Address
Guest: Richard Gamble
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WOODS: It is very important to talk about this subject here given that we are speaking today on the 150th anniversary of the Gettysburg Address. It's an iconic speech, really. It's something that everybody memorizes in school, and we all doff our hats to it, and it's almost like a sacred text. In a way, that's what's wrong with it. So, why is it important for us? If I were to ask the average historian or the average American politician why is it important for us to study the Gettysburg Address or be aware of it, I would get a fairly predictable answer. But I think I'm going to get a different answer from Richard Gamble.

GAMBLE: I think you might. I'm interested in how the speech was absorbed into what we could call the American political theology, or into the American civil religion, or maybe even say into the American scripture. That scripture has been added to over the years. We have the Declaration of Independence in it. We have the Constitution. We have maybe George Washington's Farewell Address. But that Gettysburg Address has taken a pride of place, really, in the American scripture.

WOODS: Now, you've done some important writing on what we might call the American civil religion, and I think this is really where the Gettysburg Address comes in and is so important. So, first of all, what exactly is a civil religion?

GAMBLE: That's a really important question, Tom, and I think even a lot of scholars, who are supposed to be experts in this, don't give careful enough attention to defining our terms. There are two broad meanings to civil religion. The one is the use that the government, that the state makes use of religion, religious language, for its own purposes. How the state appropriates religion. Sometimes this can be very subtle. Sometimes this can be overt. And I can come back to that, if we'd like to flesh that out. The other meaning of civil religion is when we take some of the events, people, documents, ideas, the themes of our own history and elevate them to such a degree that we turn them into something sacred, something that becomes part of a national liturgy for us, something part of, as I was saying, a national scripture.

Now, not every aspect of that would be dangerous. I have more reservations about a nation state taking the language and the imagery and verses from the Bible and attaching it to itself. I have deep concerns about that. And, I've written, as you said, for many years about that problem. The other side of that, the other side of civil religion, this elevation of these secular matters to such a degree that they become sacred to us, I have fewer concerns about that, but I do have a concern when we take them as dogma, when we take them as almost parts of a national apostles' creed. We recite them. We confess them together. And that means that we don't really read them anymore. We don't scrutinize what the words on the page actually say,

what they meant at their own moment in time. They tend to be these disembodied words, detached from all context, all history, anything recognizable as tangible meaning.

WOODS: Well, let me raise something that concerns me quite a bit about this phenomenon, and we see it not just in the Gettysburg Address and the rhetoric of Lincoln, but in many different aspects of American history. It is the appropriation of religious language and the application of religious language and biblical imagery to the U.S. government, to the U.S. government's intentions, to the U.S. government's adventures overseas. And so these things then leave the mundane world of everyday life and ascend to the heavens and become beyond question, because we sort of imbibe them as we would a religious text. Whether or not we ourselves are personally religious, we're reading something, and we're hearing words that have a religious resonance, and because of that, we instinctively then think of the goals and aims and purposes of the U.S. government as being something that's not quite this worldly, but really something that is greater than, that is larger than life.

GAMBLE: Right. We invest it with this power and authority, as you mentioned, this sacred authority as if the pronouncements of the United States government were handed down along with the Ten Commandments from Mount Sinai. Or as if they were part of the Sermon on the Mount that Jesus delivered. And that these have the same binding power upon people in how they think about their government. And in its very worst manifestation, it can reflect a kind of idolatry, the idolatry of the state, even in very subtle ways, ways that we don't realize we're doing. We ascribe to government a role in our lives that it cannot, and ought not, possibly hold.

WOODS: Well, let me depart from this article just for a minute. We're talking about your article "Gettysburg Gospel," that people can read at theamericanconservative.com. It's in the November/December print issue, but you can also read it online at theamericanconservative.com, and we're linking to it next to this program at TomWoodsRadio.com. But just to flesh out the idea a little bit, I want to refer to a couple of your other books, because this theme is really a very important one in your writing.

Your book, *The City Upon the Hill*, tell me again the title.

GAMBLE: It's *In Search of the City on a Hill: The Making and Unmaking of an American Myth.*

WOODS: Now that book, which I actually reviewed for this very publication, is examining this image that we hear. It's funny, I hear people once in a while say, "As Ronald Reagan said, 'We are a city upon a hill.'" Which is just wrong on so many levels. Like Reagan thought that up, right? Or, "as John Winthrop said. . . ." Well, that's at least one level better. But what you showed in there was that this seemingly innocent image has a biblical meaning, and it's perfectly fine in its biblical meaning. It began to have a secular meaning, and that becomes a problem.

Likewise, you have a book, *The War for Righteousness*. Now whether or not the U.S. should have entered World War I is a practical question. But it became elevated to the level of dogma

because, well, Germany became Satan, and the American soldier was Christ. Flesh some of this out a little bit. Tell us about this.

GAMBLE: Sure. I'd be happy to. And you're right. This has been on my mind for about twenty-five years now, and, as a matter of fact, you'll probably be pleased to know that my current project is on "The Battle Hymn of the Republic."

WOODS: Oh, fantastic!

GAMBLE: We'll have to come back to this conversation another time, too, and flesh it out a bit more.

There has been a powerful tendency in American culture going all the way back to New England settlers especially, Puritan settlers in the early seventeenth century, to talk about where they were. I like the term you used just a moment ago: "practical affairs." They would talk about the practical affairs of this world—government, economics, society, social order—as if they were an extension of the life of the Christian church. I think innocently at first in ways we really don't find very surprising, considering who they were, where they came from; they talk about their political community in New England as if it were actually a church congregation. That meant they took, as a matter of habit, they took the language of the Old Testament and the New Testament, language talking about the church—

Let me give a concrete example here. In the New Testament, when the apostles say that Christians are members, one of another, or that they are bound together by the bonds of affection, that is a spiritual truth about the church.

But when you say that your political community is bound together in this way, ought to be bound with these bonds of affection, then in ways subtle and not so subtle, these settlers ended up taking the identity—they took the language of the church, and they took the language of Old Testament Israel, and therefore, they took the identity. That allowed them to slip into this pride and arrogance of thinking that all the promises that God had made to Israel, all the promises that God had made to the Christian church, he actually made to this American colony—when he says that "Your enemies shall be my enemies," and it gets more and more exaggerated over the years. We see it again during the Revolutionary War. We see it back during the colonial wars. You can hear it in the sermons of George Whitefield, back in the 1740s with the colonial wars. We see it again in the War of 1812. We hear it among the New England Transcendentalists and others in the 1840s, 1850s. Civil War—major, major instance of this mixing together of the church and the state, of the heavenly and the earthly, of the things of God and the things of Caesar. And it goes on to the Spanish American War, World War I, World War II. And that habit is with us to the present day.

WOODS: And this language is absolutely everywhere. The U.S. government has appropriated biblical language and references and applied them to itself again and again, and yet the people who least object to this are Christians themselves, who are the ones who should stand up and

say, “Well, this is blasphemy. This is idolatry of the most grotesque kind.” But instead, they are tying yellow ribbons to their cars and waving little American flags.

GAMBLE: This has become a real burden to me as a writer, as a teacher. And one of my goals is that I hope what I write with my articles and my books will especially reach people who identify themselves as conservative Christians or evangelicals. That’s not my only audience, to be sure, but I hope they become self-aware—that’s never been true before—become aware of how the culture uses this language, how their government uses this language, how they themselves use this language. I hope that people in churches that use the Pledge of Allegiance as part of their liturgy—and I know of an example of that in Georgia—I hope they think seriously about the implications of what they’re doing. And that they realize in a fresh way that they can be good Christians and good American patriots and keep those two things in separate categories.

WOODS: I want you to say a little something about the religious language that’s in the Gettysburg Address. It’s not as obvious as it might be in some other speeches, yet when you look at it closely, it actually does start to jump off the page a bit, if you know the biblical references. So can you give them to us?

GAMBLE: I can, and I’ll start with two observations. Lincoln himself was far more explicit in other speeches of his. From the time he was a young man in the 1830s, he would quote the Bible as his whole generation would. He would quote the promises of Jesus that the “gates of hell” would “not prevail against” the church. He would apply that to the American nation, to American ideas. He famously used the “house divided against itself will not stand”; that’s right out of the Bible, Jesus talking about the work of Satan. So he used the Bible quite explicitly. But you’re right, in the Gettysburg Address, it is much more subtle, much more nuanced.

The second thing, then, to put in place is his audience. In 1863, they’re present on the battlefield of Gettysburg, or reading this in the newspapers across the country, or even reading it in Southern newspapers, as they did. That audience knew the Bible. That audience knew the King James version of the Bible. It was the book that they were reared on. It’s the book that they were guaranteed to have in the home, the family Bible, read from frequently. So the influence of the Bible is evident in this speech, even in its rhythm, even in its use of the opening words “fourscore and seven years ago.” That’s a very old-fashioned way of speaking, even in 1863. It reminds us immediately of the psalmist saying that man’s years are “threescore and ten, unless by strength they are fourscore.” Eighty years. So Lincoln—even if he’s not aware of it at that point, he is adopting the word choice, the rhythm, the tone, and really then the authority of sacred text. This short speech sounds like, reads like, it’s a passage of Scripture.

Even more subtle than that, there’s language that could be quotations. We have language such as, “bought forth on this continent a new nation.” I’m not saying he drew that directly from the gospels in saying that “Mary brought forth her firstborn son.” But it echoes that; it brings that to mind. The very closing lines, “shall not perish from the earth.” Thousands and thousands of evangelicals in the 1860s would have recognized that as coming from John 3:16—“shall not perish but shall have everlasting life.”

These are promises of salvation that Lincoln is weaving into this speech in a very artful, very poetic way. The language of consecration, which appears repeatedly—"hallowed"—all of this elevates the speech to the sacred level, and the biblical cadences and the biblical quotations make it feel like sacred text.

WOODS: Now given that we can just talk forever about the religious aspect, I don't want to forget about the political philosophy that's in this. I mean, the speech is just 271 words. It's so short. And yet, as you note in your article, it's sort of disembodied. It lacks specific names. It doesn't mention Gettysburg. It doesn't mention North and South. It doesn't mention slavery. It doesn't mention the Union. It's like an ethereal thing, and yet, there is an essential political claim about the history of the U.S. and the Union that is being made in here that your average schoolchild misses completely. The schoolchild thinks the point of the speech is the exhortation that government "by the people, for the people" not perish from the earth—they think that's the key point of the speech. But it's not. What's the key point of the speech?

GAMBLE: That's right. I think even historians on the Left can't escape what this speech achieves. It changes the American memory, and I don't want to make this too complex, but let's just think about the opening sentence: "Fourscore and seven years ago." That's eighty-seven years. If we do the math and subtract eighty-seven from 1863, that takes us back to 1776. So Lincoln is claiming that something happened: The birth of—now, not the birth of an independent America happened in 1776; he's not even saying that the states were liberated from British colonialism. He's not even saying that the union began in 1776. He argued that back in his First Inaugural Address. He argued that it went back to 1774. What he claims here is an audacious claim that unfortunately we still believe today. He is saying that a nation was born in North America on July 4, 1776.

And to say that a nation, to say that that in the context of the mid-nineteenth century, to say that a nation was born then gives him an entire justification for the American Civil War. It makes the South's resistance unthinkable. It makes the South's resistance illegitimate because a single thing was born—a unitary nation state was born—in 1776. And that's pretty bad history, but that's powerful history. Back through the Gettysburg Address, we tend to read all of American history up until 1863 through the lens of this short speech. And that's one reason why I think, on its anniversary, we need to take a fresh look at it.

WOODS: Now, toward the end of your article, you bring up this point from Michael Oakeshott, but it's something that M.E. Bradford also referred to: the difference between something that's teleocratic and something that's nomocratic, and you're saying that Lincoln, just by virtue of this speech, in effect, launches the U.S. on its teleocratic history. Teleocratic means that it's aimed at an end. Whereas a nomocratic regime would be one in which you have individuals and families and communities and they just live out their lives how they wish.

A teleocratic regime is dedicated to a proposition. You say in here, "Lincoln left all Americans, North and South, with a purpose-driven nation." What's wrong with that? Isn't it wonderful for

us to have a common purpose? And for us to go around the world and do good deeds and stuff? What's the matter with a teleocratic regime?

GAMBLE: Well, as we know from experience, it depends who gets to pick the goal, the end. I get nervous about a central government, a very powerful, armed, loaded, debt-ridden central government claiming that this is going to be the goal of all Americans, and they need to be united in this goal. For those of us who understand the American government more in terms of a government of law and liberty, a decentralized government of law and liberty, a government armed with a doctrine—that's Burke's phrase, from the 1790s; he was afraid that the French Jacobins had an armed doctrine—I fear a central government that has a powerful notion of what we're all supposed to be doing, where we're all supposed to be heading, what ideology we're all supposed to be committed to. And the suggestion there is: I find the meaning of life itself by being attached to the American nation-state.

Now, I love America. This is my home. This is the place that is near and dear to me. But I think I can figure out the question of the highest purposes in life by myself, with my family, with my community, with my church. I don't want the central government saying, "No, this is the purpose—the transcendent purpose—of why we exist. We need to govern you with a big capital 'I' Idea." That's frightening to our liberty, our individual liberty and our autonomy as communities. And Lincoln dedicates America to a proposition. That might make some people a little bit nervous because that proposition comes—if it is a proposition, it comes from the Declaration of Independence. "All men are created equal." But when you strip down the complexity of history, strip down a document as complex as the Declaration of Independence, to one part of one sentence, and then say that this is what America means, this is what we must be committed to, it's a very short step to saying, "Well, you know, my idea of 'all men are created equal' is an expansive vision of domestic social justice." "Well, my vision of 'all men are created equal' is a universalist, benevolent mission for the American empire, and this has to be granted to people around the world, no matter how costly in lives and wealth." We can see how dangerous it is to turn a nation and a people, or a federal republic and a people, into an abstract idea and say we all must be marching toward the fulfillment of that abstract idea.

WOODS: I was going to ask you how we see Lincolnian rhetoric in modern politics, but I think you already answered it. It's something that neither the Left nor the Right wants to give up, because, of course, once you're victorious politically, then, whatever your ideological pet project happens to be, you can impose it as the real meaning of what it means to be an American, and we have to all march forward according to this idea together. And, of course, this whole kind of total political community idea is completely contrary to the idea of a modest republic, of a government with limited powers, and states, and robust communities. And yet, you have so many conservatives who claim to believe in all those things, but they adopt this Lincolnian rhetoric hook, line, and sinker.

GAMBLE: Right. Right. And there are some pretty prominent journals, and prominent editors, who blast away at conservatives who don't get on board with this Lincoln vision and this modern, mission-driven unitary nation state. That's deeply troubling because I was taught years

ago that conservatism was non-ideological, that it wasn't about marching in some grand movement. And that's the kind of traditionalism that I have always identified with— that we are capable, in our small communities, of self-government. We are capable of responsible liberty and self-government, and the Lincoln idea has kept America committed to these grand visions of a national community in pursuit of an unending mission.