

Restoring Roots

SPEAKER Frank Costenbader

DATE Sunday, January 5, 2025

PASSAGES Deuteronomy 8; John 15; Revelation 3; Psalm 19

MESSAGE Begins at 1:05:49 in the service

THE BIG IDEA

Cut flowers stay beautiful for a while. They are already dead; they just do not know it yet, because they have been separated from their roots. Frank's argument, borrowed from a sermon preached to the United States Senate in 1987, is that a nation can live the same way — and that the greatest danger is not the atheist but the believer who says God is real and lives as though he were not.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ◆ Frank did not preach his own sermon. He preached Richard Halverson's — delivered to the Senate on the bicentennial of the Constitution — because when he asked the Lord about it, the answer he got was, "I gave it to him, I'm giving it to you."
- ◆ The American political order rests on two claims: that rights are given by a Creator, and that government holds only the power the people consent to give it. Remove God from that and the structure has nothing underneath it.
- ◆ Moses did not warn Israel about poverty. He warned them about prosperity — that full barns make proud hearts, and proud hearts forget.
- ◆ There is no biblical case against wealth. The danger is not having money; it is money taking the place God should hold.
- ◆ Lukewarmness, not opposition, is what Jesus says he will spit out of his mouth. Laodicea thought it needed nothing.
- ◆ Fatalism about the church's prospects is a lie sold to believers. If greater is he who is in us, the losing-battle premise is nonsense.

- ◆ The invitation was concrete: fast and pray before January 20, ask God to show you yourself first, and take on one named politician in prayer.

► 1:05:53

Frank opened with the prayer he always opens with —

“Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight” — and then explained that this message came to him differently than any other. Asked in December to preach, he went through his usual process of asking the Lord for a passage or a story. He got neither. He got a name.

Whose sermon this is

► 1:09:39

Richard Halverson, a Presbyterian pastor at Fourth Presbyterian Church in Bethesda, Maryland, was the 60th chaplain of the United States Senate, from 1981 until his death in 1995. The woman who disciplined Frank’s wife Deborah attended that church; Deborah went whenever she could and told him you never knew what was going to happen there. Frank had not thought about Halverson in thirty years.

The chaplaincy is older than most people realize. When the Senate first convened on April 6, 1789, one of its first orders of business was to find one, and it elected Samuel Provoost, the Episcopal Bishop of New York. The job is not ceremonial — spiritual care and counsel for senators, their families and their staffs, a constituency of roughly six thousand people, plus prayer meetings and a weekly senators’ prayer breakfast.

Halverson preached the sermon Frank read on September 17, 1987, the two-hundredth anniversary of the signing of the Constitution. He called it *The Question Facing Us*. When Frank asked the Lord whether he should preach another man’s message, the answer was direct: “I gave it to him, I’m giving it to you.” He changed only what was too awkward to quote, and said the thing has aged in the wrong direction — almost forty years on, spiritually and morally, worse.

Cut flowers

► 1:14:27

Halverson’s wife Doris would not have cut flowers in the house, and he could not understand it. They were beautiful. They smelled good. Her answer was that it did not matter what you did for them —

water, refrigeration, anything — they were going to wilt and be thrown out, because they were already dead. They had been cut from their roots.

Halverson had lived in Washington more than thirty years when he preached this, and the conviction that had been deepening in him — and that detonated when he became chaplain — was that Doris had described the country. A futile effort to preserve the beauty, strength and order of a national life already severed from what produced it.

“We the people”

► 1:15:52

Frank read the preamble aloud and asked the room to hear how strange it was. Every other nation then had a king; the people were *subjects*, called that because they were subjected to whatever the king wanted. Kings claimed divinity and headship of the church, which meant they meant to govern not only what people did but what people thought. We can relate to that today, he noted, more than we would like.

► 1:17:58

He traced the idea back further than 1787 — to the first chapter of Genesis, where God puts the couple in the garden and makes them stewards of the earth. People as partners in governing. Then he worked backward through two sentences of the Declaration: rights are inalienable because they are endowed by a Creator, and governments exist to secure them, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. A sovereign people, not a sovereign government. “Take God out of the equation, the whole thing collapses. No equality, no human rights.”

► 1:19:30

The illustration Halverson reached for was fresh at the time: the Senate had just honored Anatoly Sharansky, a Russian computer programmer who asked as a Jew to emigrate to Israel, lost his job for it, and spent nine years in the Gulag. Soviet Russia, like China now, wanted to govern thought as well as behavior; Mao’s line was that there is one truth, the one the state declares politically correct. That is where the phrase comes from. Sharansky was the victim of a godless government, and godless governments do not care about human rights.

Beware prosperity

► 1:21:35

Moses is at the end of forty years, about to hand Israel over to the land, and the warning he chooses is not about hardship.

“Take care lest you forget the Lord your God by not keeping his commandments... lest, when you have eaten and are full and have built good houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks multiply and your silver and gold is multiplied and all that you have is multiplied, then your heart be lifted up, and you forget the Lord your God... Beware lest you say in your heart, ‘My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth.’ You shall remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth.”

DEUTERONOMY 8:11–18 ↗

► 1:23:23

Frank stopped on the word. *Beware prosperity*. Isn't that the whole American project? He added a footnote of his own: you cannot build a case against wealth from the Bible, and the same passage says God is the one who makes it possible. The problem is substitution — wealth taking God's place. Which is exactly the choice Jesus frames in Matthew 6:24: no one can serve two masters, God and mammon. And the sentence Moses lands on is unambiguous — forget the Lord and go after other gods and you will perish. Not because you were wealthy. Because you did not listen.

The reading earlier had been the vine, and it sits underneath all of this:

“Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.”

JOHN 15:4–5 ↗; SEE ALSO JOHN 15:1 ↗

The problem is not the atheist

► 1:24:47

Of the seven churches in Revelation, the last one gets the harshest word, and it is not for hostility.

“So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth. For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.”

REVELATION 3:16–17 ↗

Roger Hull, president of Mutual of New York and one of Halverson's closest friends, used to say the greatest danger America faced was the casual Christian. Halverson agreed, bluntly: "I'm not bothered at all by atheists. They're not the problem in America. The problem in America are the people who say they believe God and act like He doesn't even exist." Not the secularist or the humanist — evangelicals who have taken up a secular way of life, materialism, the love of money. Frank let the date do the work: that was the diagnosis forty years ago.

► 1:26:02

And it is to that church — the one that needs nothing — that Jesus says "Behold, I stand at the door and knock." He is outside, asking to be let back in.

Four quotations, and what they used to be possible to print

► 1:26:46

Halverson closed with four, and Frank's reaction to reading them was that no mainstream outlet would run the first two now. A *Life* editorial from April 11, 1949: communism is not the greatest threat to Western civilization; the greatest threat comes from within it, and our euphemism for it is secularism, the blunter word being godlessness. David Lawrence — founder and editor of *U.S. News & World Report*, and the only non-senator who regularly attended the Senate prayer breakfasts — wrote in 1956 that NATO is temporary, the United Nations is temporary, every alliance is temporary, and the only permanent thing is a God-controlled world.

► 1:29:31

Third, MacArthur on the deck of the Missouri at the Japanese surrender: war had seemed the last resort and had proved not to be, the problem is basically theological, and our character has not kept pace with two thousand years of advance in science and art and material life. "It must be of the spirit if we are to save the flesh."

► 1:30:18

Fourth, Lincoln, two years into the Civil War, setting April 30, 1863 as a day of national humiliation, fasting and prayer — Frank repeated the phrase to be sure it landed. Nations, the proclamation says, owe their dependence on the overruling power of God and are bound to confess their sins in humble sorrow; only those nations are blessed whose God is the Lord. "Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace. Too proud to pray to the God who made us. We have grown in numbers, wealth, and power as no other nation has grown. But we have forgotten God."

Halverson's closing question, which Frank left standing: can the liberties of a nation be secure when we have removed the conviction that those liberties are a gift from God?

What he actually asked us to do

► 1:34:56

Frank said he would spend time before January 20 fasting and praying for the nation, and invited the church into it — fasting, humility, repentance, prayer, beginning with himself. “I want him to show me about me.” The promise he stood on was the one made to a nation on its knees:

“If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land.”

2 CHRONICLES 7:14 ↗

He had no patience for Christian fatalism. Too many people in the church, he said, believe the battle is already lost and that scripture ordained it that way — which makes “greater is he who is in you than he who is in the world” into nonsense. “You’ve been sold a lie. Don’t buy it. Pray.”

► 1:37:19

He tied it back to what the room had sung that morning — [Isaiah 60:1–3](#), arise and shine, darkness covering the earth and the Lord rising over you, nations coming to the brightness of your dawn. Not nationalism, he said; the nations are drawn to the Lord. Then the most concrete instruction of the morning: ask God to give you the name of one particular politician, and go for it. Pray for mercy, for protection, for salvation if they are not saved, for godly counsel around them. “We fight in prayer.”

He ended by praying for the church and for the country, thanking God for the people who crafted a constitution that gave us freedom to worship — freedom, he said, worth fighting for — and asking for revival. Then the heart ministry teams came forward.

FOR FURTHER STUDY**SCRIPTURE IN THIS MESSAGE**

- Psalm 19:14
- Deuteronomy 8:11–18
- Deuteronomy 8:19
- John 15:1
- John 15:4–5
- Genesis 1:28
- Matthew 6:24
- Revelation 3:16–17
- Revelation 3:20
- 2 Chronicles 7:14
- 1 John 4:4
- Isaiah 60:1–3

FOR YOUR HOPE GROUP

1. Where do you see the cut-flower pattern in your own life — something still beautiful that has quietly been separated from what was feeding it?
2. Moses warns about full barns rather than empty ones. What has prosperity made it easy for you to stop asking God for?
3. Frank said the danger is not the atheist but the person who says God is real and lives as though he is not. Where does that describe you, specifically?
4. Laodicea's symptom was "I need nothing." What would it look like this month to answer the knock at the door rather than manage the house you already have?
5. He asked for one named politician to pray for and time set aside to fast before January 20. What is your name, and when this week are you doing it?

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Frank Costenbader was asked by Matt to preach this January message and, as he described it, went through his usual process of asking the Lord for a passage or a story — receiving instead the name of Richard Halverson, the Senate chaplain whose sermon he then preached. His wife is Deborah, who was discipled by a woman from Halverson's congregation in Bethesda. He told the church he would be fasting and praying for the nation before January 20, and invited them to join him.

Watch the full message:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z4dfNKAkDTI&t=3949s>

These notes summarise a message preached at Hope Chapel in Austin, Texas. They are a reader's aid, not a transcript — scripture references link to the full passage so you can read it in context.