American idol: David Barton's dream of a Christian nation

by Kurt W. Peterson in the October 31, 2006 issue

One of the most startling developments in the culture war is the apparent takeover of the Republican Party by conservative evangelicals who claim that the U.S. is a Christian nation, uniquely called and blessed by God. Fearing that the nation has strayed from the founders' Christian intentions, conservative activists have dived into politics, hoping to reclaim the nation for God.

The efforts of evangelical lawmakers have produced striking results. In Missouri, Republican legislators have proposed a resolution declaring that the founding fathers "recognized a Christian God" and established the nation on God's principles. The resolution goes on to defend voluntary prayer in schools and religious displays on public property because they reveal "the positive role that Christianity has played in this great nation of ours."

The 2004 Texas GOP platform affirmed "that the United States of America is a Christian nation," founded "on fundamental Judeo-Christian principles based on the Holy Bible." Texas Republicans formally rejected "the efforts of courts and secular activists who seek to remove and deny such a rich heritage from our public lives," and even declared the doctrine of separation of church and state to be a "myth" that must be rejected in order to restore the founders' original intent.

One of the architects of that platform was David Barton, vice chair of the Texas Republican Party and one of the chief advocates for a Christian America. Barton's view of American history has energized millions of voters and forced lawmakers to take conservative Christian causes seriously. Declared by *Time* magazine in 2005 to be one of the 25 "most influential evangelicals in America," Barton has constructed a providentialist interpretation of American history to go with the issue-based advocacy of the religious right.

According to this view, the United States has abandoned its covenantal commitment to God, and its only hope of avoiding destruction in the form of divine judgment is

for Americans to reclaim their godly heritage, recommit themselves to traditional morality and elect Christians to office. Then and only then will the nation halt the moral decline evident since the cultural upheaval of the 1960s.

Barton once declared to a large evangelical congregation in Ohio, “The culture war in this country is tied at halftime. I’d be worried, but the good news is I know the rest of the team—all of you—is going to be showing up to play in the second half.” Speaking at hundreds of churches, conferences and political meetings across the country, Barton recruits fellow combatants to battle. He presses for Bible instruction in public schools, school prayer, public displays of the Ten Commandments, impeachment of “activist” judges, anti-abortion statutes, prohibition of gay marriage and a host of other conservative positions. Barton sees the struggle as one between “light and darkness, truth and lies, righteousness and evil.” He even goes so far as to claim that individual Christians will be accountable to God on judgment day for the votes they cast; God will be checking whether they voted Republican.

Through his books, pamphlets, amicus briefs, Supreme Court testimony, political consulting and frequent public appearances, Barton has become one of the most powerful figures in conservative Christian politics. In 1989 Barton founded WallBuilders, based in Aledo, Texas, whose expressed goal is “to exert a positive influence in government, education, and the family by 1) educating the nation concerning the Godly foundation of our country; 2) providing information to federal, state and local officials as they develop public policies which reflect Biblical values; and 3) encouraging Christians to get involved in the civic arena.”

The name “WallBuilders” comes from the Old Testament book of Nehemiah. Barton uses this concept of “rebuilding the walls” to represent his “call for citizen involvement in rebuilding our nation’s foundations.”

Barton has developed connections in every sector of the Christian right. It was after an appearance on James Dobson’s radio program in the late 1980s that he first found a large audience. He appears regularly on D. James Kennedy’s radio program, broadcast from Kennedy’s Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church in Coral Gables, Florida. Barton has spoken at two “Reclaiming America for Christ” conferences sponsored by Kennedy’s lobbying group, the Center for Reclaiming America. He has also appeared on Pat Robertson’s *700 Club* television talk show, and his literature is marketed by every major Christian right church and organization, including Focus on the Family, the Christian Coalition, and scores of Christian socially conservative advocacy

organizations like the Eagle Forum and the Providence Foundation.

Barton's connections extend beyond Christian networks to the heart of the Republican Party in Texas and in Washington. Barton speaks regularly at pastors' briefings sponsored by the Texas Restoration Project—a network of hundreds of "patriot pastors" whose goal is to "reclaim Texas" and "restore Texas and America to our Judeo-Christian heritage." These pastors' briefings are a combination of revival meeting and political rally, featuring pastors and Republican leaders who encourage Christians to take the reins of culture through the democratic process.

The language at these gatherings is often highly charged. At one briefing in Arlington, Texas, pastor Dwight McKissic informed the audience that God sent Hurricane Katrina to destroy New Orleans in order to purify a nation that is increasingly tolerant of homosexuals. In 2005, the Texas Restoration Project sponsored "Reclaiming Texas Sunday," a get-out-the-vote campaign in which pastors encouraged parishioners to support Proposition 2, a state constitutional ban on gay marriage.

Barton's pastors' briefings have become national affairs. One briefing featured representatives Tom DeLay, Dick Armey and Chris Smith and senators Sam Brownback and James Inhofe. The invitation was printed on WallBuilders stationery and signed by Representative J. C. Watts. Barton has spoken at several "Worldview Weekends" alongside evangelical lights like Charles Colson, Tim LaHaye, David Limbaugh (Rush's born-again brother), actor Kirk Cameron and DeLay. Among Barton's many media credits are appearances on Fox's *Hannity and Colmes* and on ABC's *Nightline*, where he defended DeLay's attack on activist judges in the wake of the Terri Schiavo case. Barton is also active in the national struggle over public school curricula, consulting with both Texas and California on educational standards.

His work has been praised by Newt Gingrich and numerous members of Congress. With Senate leader Bill Frist in 2005, Barton gave a "Spiritual Heritage Tour" of the capitol, one of hundreds of such tours he has led for citizens and lawmakers. Barton was hired during the 2004 campaign as a consultant by the Republican National Committee to give a series of get-out-the-vote speeches to clergy around the country.

Although Barton's political connections are important, it is his ideas that matter. His work is informed by a particular view of history. While he has produced dozens of

books, pamphlets, tracts and audio releases, his ideas are displayed most clearly in his 1989 self-published book *The Myth of Separation*, later edited and republished as *Original Intent: The Courts, the Constitution and Religion* (WallBuilders, 1996). Barton distilled the main ideas from that book into a 1993 video, *America's Godly Heritage*.

According to Barton, the vast majority of the founding fathers were committed evangelical Christians who credited God for the nation's success. Jumping from one citation to another, he selectively retrieves remarks from George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson and John Quincy Adams and claims these founders as Christian conservatives. He interprets all references to "Providence" by the founding fathers as references to the personal God of evangelical Christianity.

Barton cites approvingly John Jay's claim that Americans should "select and prefer Christians for their rulers," and views George Washington's survival at the Battle of the Monongahela as evidence that God was preserving Washington for his later role in the Revolution, which Barton interprets as God's struggle between liberty and tyranny. Detailing this last argument, Barton engages in a diatribe against secularist historians and contemporary educators in his booklet *The Bulletproof George Washington*.

After thus establishing that the U.S. originated as a Christian nation, Barton cites selected sources from the 19th century to prove that this remained the dominant understanding. He cites the role of the Bible in teaching literacy; Charles Finney's conversion, brought about by his study of Blackstone's *Commentaries on the Laws*; and an 1892 Supreme Court opinion, *Church of the Holy Trinity v. U.S.*, which stated, "This is a Christian nation."

Having developed his providential view of America's past, Barton critiques modern American culture. "The First Amendment never intended to separate Christian principles from government," he declares, pointing out that the phrase "wall of separation between church and state" appears not in the Constitution but in Jefferson's letter to Danbury Baptists in 1801. The "original intent" of the founders, Barton argues, was to prohibit "the establishment of a single national denomination," not to remove Christianity from the center of public life.

Barton pins the creation of the "myth of separation of church and state" on 20th-century judges. He argues that the vast majority of Americans assumed that the U.S.

was a Christian nation until the 1960s, when judges denied the will of the people by removing God from public life.

Central to this drama are two Supreme Court cases: *Engle v. Vitale* (1962), in which the Court decided that government-directed prayer in public schools was an unconstitutional violation of the First Amendment's establishment clause; and *Abington v. Schempp* (1963), which declared unconstitutional a Pennsylvania statute that provided for compulsory Bible reading in public classrooms. Those two cases serve are watershed events in Barton's story of America, for they resulted, he says, in God's turning his face from the U.S. and allowing the nation to descend into rampant immorality.

With a series of multicolor charts, Barton shows that beginning in 1962 the number of teenage pregnancies, divorces and single-parent families went up, as did rates for sexually transmitted diseases and violent crime. SAT scores started to fall. All because of *Engle v. Vitale*.

When discussing student performance on achievement tests, Barton notes that private or religious schools account for a disproportionately high number of National Merit Scholars and says that is because "one school utilizes religions principles and one does not." Factors like class, race and region play no role in Barton's reasoning.

For Barton, it was in the early 1960s when "for the first time in the nation's history, we officially told God He was no longer welcome in the public affairs of this nation. The charts simply illustrate a principle that the Founders understood, believed and discussed"—namely, that the nation will prosper only if it honors God.

In Barton's view, the U.S., like ancient Israel, is in a covenantal relationship with God. Citing numerous Old Testament examples, Barton argues that God deals with nations "based on the stands of the nation's leaders. The courts and our elected officials have pushed God from public life, and now we are suffering the consequences."

Barton rallies the troops with the age-old jeremiad of moral declension. Citing a 1963 study stating that 97 percent of the nation believed in God, Barton thunders, "We have lost ground in recent years as we have lost our understanding of the Founders' intent and teachings. We do have a Godly heritage in America, but we have been robbed—robbed by the 3 percent." He continues, "We have got to get involved and take [our heritage] back. A Godly heritage is the foundation of America;

and the church must take right ground. We must recover the things that we've given up in recent years. We must get involved!"

Barton is clearly more interested in current cultural squabbles than he is in history. Put simply, Barton is a bad historian. In fact he has no training as a historian—his B.A., from Oral Roberts University, is in math education. He retrieves only those aspects of history that, often taken out of context, match his emphasis on America's Christian identity. And by levying ad hominem attacks on his detractors, he remains outside genuine historical discussion.

Some of his critics have matched him in vitriol. Americans United for Separation of Church and State, the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, the Texas Freedom Network and a host of other institutions and individuals have attacked Barton as an enemy of freedom. One source accused him (falsely) of knowingly addressing neo-Nazi hate groups. Recent books and articles have lumped Barton in with the "theocrats," "Christian nationalists," "religious Reconstructionists," "Dominionists," even "neo-fascists," whose mere existence threatens the foundations of American democracy.

Amid these attacks, it is important to differentiate the particle of truth in Barton's work from the nonsense. It's true that most of the founders were at least loosely Christian; they affirmed the existence of Providence and thought that Providence played a role in the shaping of the new nation. Barton is right to point out that Christianity had a much more important role in 18th-century culture than it does in today's. And he is right to question those who interpret "separation of church and state" to mean the removal of religion from public life. Historically, Christianity has been a significant factor in our nation's history, sometimes supporting power structures in their search for hegemony, sometimes critiquing those who use power capriciously, sometimes shaping a civil religion which sustained the soul of the nation, and sometimes moving individuals to profound acts of selflessness.

But it is historically absurd of Barton to dismiss the separation of church and state as a myth, given that the founders expressly intended to end state support for a specific church. The founders were, on the whole, less religiously orthodox than the average American. They pushed the new nation toward tolerance and less reliance upon historic Christianity.

It is anachronistic to label the founders evangelical Christians. Some were orthodox Christians, some were deists, and only a few might be termed evangelical in the modern sense. Although almost all of them affirmed the role of religion in moral formation and saw Providence at work in America's founding, their belief in the moral governance of the universe was more a reflection of their assumptions as Enlightenment thinkers who did not separate religion from public life than a sign of heartfelt Christian belief.

It is interesting, in this context, that Barton thinks the Supreme Court should have upheld school prayer in *Engle v. Vitale*. The prayer in question, spoken at the beginning of each school day, was "Almighty God, we acknowledge our dependence upon Thee, and we beg Thy blessings upon us, our parents, our teachers and our country. Amen." Such a bland prayer represents an anesthetized civic faith, not the robust faith of the Christian tradition. By calling for a least-common-denominator public faith, Barton seems happy to settle for less than the God of historic Christian orthodoxy.

Examining Barton's misunderstanding of the relation between Christianity and public life might help us develop a sounder conception of Christian citizenship.

To begin with, Barton reduces Christianity to individual morality. Absent from his historical and theological writings is a full notion of God's justice. For Barton, a righteous God is primarily concerned with abortion, divorce, public displays of the Ten Commandments and homosexual sex—not with poverty, racial oppression, environmental degradation or global hunger. Any notion of Christian citizenship must have a fuller concept than his of God's dominion over all things and God's desire to redeem all of creation.

Second, for Barton political power is an unmitigated good when used by the right people. In the face of this blind confidence in power, human history testifies over and again to the dangers of power—even when wielded for seemingly good ends. In addition, Jesus Christ modeled for humanity the surrender of power for the higher end of redemption. Christians engaging in public action should always be suspicious of power's ability to corrupt the soul. True power comes not through electoral politics, but when Christians sacrifice their needs for others.

Third, Barton makes an idol of the state. Ancient Israel was the only nation chosen by God for the special purposes of extending God's redeeming work to the world.

Even if the U.S. were God’s chosen nation, it would fulfill that calling only insofar as it lovingly brought God’s justice to all people, regardless of national identity. As global Christian citizens, American Christians must not idolize the nation, but faithfully serve God, who knows no nationality.

Finally, Barton’s vision of a Christian America has no room for the church. Without a robust theology of the church, Barton has no place to go but to the state to find the venue where Christians can act out their public commitments. When Christians engage the powers of this world, they properly do so not as a voting bloc but as the eternal community of God’s called-out ones—the church of Jesus Christ. Absent the church, which forms Christians into committed disciples, Barton, along with many American evangelicals, have turned to politics as the truest expression of Christian commitment.