

Myth-buster: Speaking truth to power

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [September 5, 2006](#) issue

Dear Pastor Gregory Boyd: My editors do not favor the “open letter” genre, so let’s consider this a “closed letter,” something I’d more or less sneak to you. I have the impulse to write because I have been reading so much about you and your ministry at Woodland Hills Church near St. Paul. You’ve been written up in the *New York Times* and the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*, and on numerous Web sites. The *Times* even had you on the front page, which is not a familiar location for evangelicals unless they are involved in sexual or financial scandals, executing power grabs, selling the prosperity gospel or telling Americans that we have to like war, for God’s sake.

It seems you’ve been preaching the words of the prophets and the Gospels. You’ve declared that it’s disastrous for the church to get too close to any national or political ideology. You’ve written a book titled *The Myth of a Christian Nation*. As a result of your views, you’ve lost 1,000 members from a flock of 5,000. That is a real blow, though most ministers I know work with a much smaller base. The loss of even a few as a result of courageous preaching is emotionally hard. And I’m told that donations to the building fund are down. But I think you’ll recover.

It seems that you are trying to rescue evangelicalism from the taint of a simple identification with pro-war policies and an obsession with social causes that are not part of the prophetic tradition. Of course, you are not alone; there are always “7,000 in Israel” who have not bowed the knee. So far as I can tell, you are not counseling social passivity but criticizing political predictability. Exactly where that will take you is hard to say, ministry and preaching and prophecy being as complex as they are. I’m writing not to say that I agree or will agree with all you say but to applaud you for your courage and your ability to “go to the sources” that so much of evangelicalism, mainline Protestantism and Catholicism forget.

I've read that you "challenged directly the misleading nature of the political claim that we ought to 'Take America back to God,'" saying that "America never belonged to God. We were never a Godly nation. . . . There are no good old days where we were truly operating by kingdom principles. Nothing is to compete with God . . . God is the beginning and the end." That sounds like Karl Barth or Jeremiah or the New England divines or the grandparents of today's evangelicalism.

In our highly polarized nation and churches, for you to receive positive notice in the *Times* or *Star-Tribune* (or the *Christian Century*) can lead your enemies—and a host of them will emerge in the weeks ahead—to say that their criticisms are confirmed by the company you will seem to be keeping. Tell them you did not solicit this support and cannot help it if suspect types find you acting with integrity and speaking truth to power.