The Keystone Connection

A Message to the Conference

June 16, 2026

Members and Friends of Keystone Conference,

"But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there we are expecting a savior, the Lord Jesus Christ." (Phillippians 3:20)

On July 4th, you may hear church bells ringing in your community (or be ringing them yourselves). Those bells are responding to an invitation from the National Bell Festival, encouraging churches, carillons, civic buildings, memorials, and individuals across the country to ring bells as a coordinated celebration of America's 250th birthday.

Bells invite us to remember, to honor, to mourn, and to celebrate. This year they ring in recognition of a nation that has much to honor, much to mourn, much to celebrate, and much still to overcome.

For some Christians, conversations about patriotism are uncomfortable. Some are wary of celebrating the nation because they know the painful chapters of our history. The dispossession of Native peoples, the sin of slavery, the long struggle for civil rights, and countless other injustices remind us that America has often failed to live up to its ideals. Others worry that criticism of the U.S. has become so dominant that we have forgotten the blessings of this country and the freedoms many around the world still long to enjoy. Rather than defending one perspective over the other, both deserve attention.

Our faith calls us to tell the truth. We do not honor God by pretending the past was better than it was. Yet we also do not honor God by refusing gratitude for the good gifts we have received. America has never been a perfect nation. Scripture reserves perfection for the Kingdom of God alone. Every human society falls short because every society is shaped by sinful people and systems. Our history is multifaceted—an often-confusing blend of possibility, destruction, aspiration, benefit, evil, resilience, compassion, progress, and regress. Complicated. Complex. Never to be simplified.

For 250 years, Americans have wrestled with a remarkable experiment in self-government. The freedoms of speech, religion, conscience, assembly, and the press have created space for vigorous debate, public dissent, and faithful witness. The church has benefited enormously from these freedoms. We gather for worship without state control, preach according to conscience, advocate for justice, organize ministries of care, and speak truth to power. These are not freedoms enjoyed equally across the world or throughout history.

The story of America has always been intertwined with the story of religion. People of faith have profoundly shaped the nation's character—for both good and ill. At our best, Christians have reminded America that its

highest ideals must be measured against God's higher standards. The freedom to practice religion with liberty of conscience is one of our most precious rights. It applies equally to Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Mormons, Jains, pagans, people of other faiths, and people of no faith. This has not always been true in practice, but it remains an ideal I would never want to surrender.

Hence why Frederick Douglass (d. 1895) remains an important voice for me. Few people understood America's ideals and failures more clearly. Having escaped slavery himself, he knew firsthand the gap between the nation's promises and its practices. Yet he refused to surrender hope. He believed that within the founding principles of the republic were possibilities still waiting to be realized.

His example offers wisdom for our own time. I believe we must reject the false choice between viewing America as beyond criticism or as nothing more than an oppressive empire. We can acknowledge the complexity of our history, seeing both the worst human beings can do and the ideals toward which we continue to strive. We can love our country without idolizing it and criticize its failures without rejecting it.

The church's role has never been to baptize the nation, nor to withdraw from it. We are called to be citizens of heaven who participate faithfully on earth—preaching the gospel, praying for our communities, loving our neighbors, practicing mercy, holding leaders accountable, giving thanks for what is good, and working to improve what is not.

As America acknowledges its 250th birthday, perhaps the most faithful response is neither celebration alone nor criticism alone, but hope: hope that truth can be told, wounds can be healed, liberty and justice can become realities rather than aspirations, and future generations might inherit a nation more fully aligned with its highest ideals.

When the bells ring on July 4th, may they remind us not only of where we have been, but also of the work still before us. In the words of Frederick Douglass, "I, therefore, leave off where I began, with hope."

Peace,

Carrie

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