

“Patriotism and the Christian”
Politics, Polarization, and Our Christian Witness #4
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(Rev. 7:9,10)

Introduction.

Recently I read that for American Christians there might not be an issue more complicated or wrapped in history and politics than the subject of patriotism.¹ Even saying the word “patriotism” in a gathering of Christians is likely to create as many responses as there are people. Just ask a group of believers, “What do you think about athletes kneeling during the singing of the National Anthem?” and you’re sure to strike up a lively and perhaps heated conversation.

Love for one's country is looked on these days by some Christians with deep reverence, but other believers view it with suspicion or even a negative reaction. It depends of the individual's point of view. And it seems to me that both sides have some good reasons for their respective opinions.

So how ought Christians think about patriotism? Is there a proper way for a follower of Jesus Christ to have and express love for one's country? How far should love of country go? And how do faithful followers of Jesus hold in tension their love of country with their primary love for Christ and His Kingdom?

As we consider this topic today, I want to talk about Patriotism that is Good, Patriotism that is Dangerous, and Patriotism that is Idolatry.

I. Patriotism that is Good.

Patriotism can be defined simply as love for one's country. It's the kind of love that makes you feel thankful that you're an American. It's the emotion that wells up in your heart when your country wins an Olympic gold medal, or you hear the story of heroism on the battlefield, or when the National Anthem is played. Patriotism can be described as that general feeling of altruistic gratitude for freedom, democracy, a certain way of life, or any of the other values that people around the world treasure about their own particular nations.

One of the favorite things my family and I liked to do when we lived in Colorado, was to participate in the Bolder Boulder 10k road race every Memorial Day. As runners we would wind our way through the streets of Boulder, and we would be cheered and encouraged along the way by rock bands, bagpipes, and even belly dancers (this was Boulder after all!). We'd end up running into the stadium at Folsom Field on the campus of the University of Colorado to the sounds of fans cheering in the stands and patriotic music blaring through the loudspeakers. It felt like you were completing a race at the Olympics.

The highlight of the day's festivities came when the race was over. 50,000 people filled the stadium, and we watched parachuters jump out of a plane, glide down, and land on the 50-yard line of the football field while Lee Greenwood's song *God Bless the USA* was played over the loudspeakers. Jets flew over the stadium just above the crowd, and a color guard presented the flags of our nation and our state. Then we would congratulate a recipient of the Congressional Medal of Honor who would tell his/her story of heroism. And all this took place in a very liberal town which earned the nickname "The People's Republic of Boulder"! It was very inspiring, and often I had goosebumps.

There are many reasons to be grateful we're Americans and live in this great nation. If you've ever traveled overseas and have seen how people live in other countries, especially if you've traveled to poorer or troubled parts of the world, you begin to appreciate all the benefits and freedoms we enjoy in this country. It truly is a land of opportunity.

Think of a time when you were filled with patriotic pride, a moment when you were proud to be an American. Perhaps it was after the attacks of 9/11, and our nation came together with a united spirit. Or maybe it was when you heard a rendition of *The Battle Hymn of the Republic* performed. Perhaps it was when you watched a newsreel of American troops liberating France in World War II. There have been many moments when I've been very proud to be an American, and I suspect you can recall moments when you have been too. When our nation is at its finest, there is much to admire.

In his book *The Four Loves*, C.S. Lewis, who was British, writes about patriotism and the Christian, and there he says this:

"First, there is love of home, of the place we grew up in or the places, perhaps many, which have been our homes; ... love of old acquaintances, of familiar sights, sounds and smells... With this love for the place there goes a love for the way of life; for beer and tea and open fires, trains with compartments in them and an unarmed police force and all the rest of it... And it would be hard to find any legitimate point of view from which this feeling could be condemned..."²

Lewis goes on to ask, "When a country proves sinful, as all countries do, should citizens then stop loving their country and hate it instead?" He suggests that would be like loving a spouse or a child *only* if they were perfect, which is absurd, of course, since that means never loving anyone. Then Lewis points out that God loved us, and Jesus died for us on the cross while we were still sinners. This is an important concept, and I believe it can help us as believers maintain a healthy love for one's home and country even when she falls short. And our country needs that kind of grace-filled forgiving love if it is ever to be a truly great a nation where everyone has their fair share, and everybody can flourish.

I've heard some people suggest that there isn't any place for patriotism in the Christian life because the Bible says that in Christ "there is neither Jew nor Greek." They say those of us who are in Christ shouldn't identify with their countries because of our citizenship in heaven. I don't agree. Tim Keller has observed that when you become a Christian, you don't stop being Taiwanese, or European, or American, but now your race and your nation don't define you as fully as they once did. That's the important distinction.³

It isn't that you cease to be a citizen of your home country. Rather, in Christ you have a new additional identity as a citizen of heaven, and you have membership in God's family which

now supersedes all the other identifying marks in your life. But it doesn't negate the other aspects of who you are. Instead, it gives a new perspective on what it means to be you and the particular country in which you live.

Let me remind you that Jesus maintained His own Jewish identity as well as His love for Jerusalem and his nation of Israel throughout His life. That's why He was so grieved at the end when His people rejected Him, and He cried out, *"Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how I longed to gather you as a hen gathers her chickens, but you weren't willing"* (Mt. 23:37).

It doesn't make biblical sense for modern-day Christians to abandon an appropriate love of home and country if Jesus Himself didn't do it. There is a right and proper place for healthy Christian patriotism and a love of one's imperfect country that is in keeping with the gospel. The problem comes when our love is blind, or we turn our love of country into an idol. When that happens, love for country fails to see the problems in a nation and it excuses injustice.

II. Patriotism that is Dangerous.

Patriotism can be a wonderful expression of one's love of country, but as followers of Jesus we need to be careful to attend to the ways in which patriotism can also be dangerous. When patriotism turns into love of country at the expense of other nations, it becomes a problem for a Christian. This happens whenever someone believes they are better than other people simply because of where they come from, or that someone else is inferior or less valuable because of where the other person is from. All of us can probably tell stories of when we've been traveling overseas, and a fellow American behaves badly and embarrasses us because of their sense of entitlement or obnoxious pride. The term "ugly American" is an apt one to describe a person who's love of country becomes offensive and rude.

Many people in the United States today talk about "American exceptionalism." Sometimes this is an expression that means good patriotism in which a person is grateful for the remarkable gift God has bestowed on America and its citizens. We live in an amazing country which has incredible natural and human resources that in many ways is the envy of the world because of the freedoms and privileges we enjoy. We see it as a stewardship trust God has given us.

However, there are other times when American exceptionalism means cherishing our national identity at the expense of others. Or it becomes an attitude that overlooks the flaws of our nation and excuses the mistakes we've made in the past. Of course, it's not just Americans who struggle with what is known as "nationalism." Most countries do this in some form or another, and the problem is universal. And we're not the first people of faith who have battled this temptation. We read about the problem of nationalism in the Bible.

(S) For example, I think of the prophet Jonah. You'll recall that in the book of Jonah, the prophet refused God's call to go to Nineveh and preach to them. And the reason he refused to go was because Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian Empire, and Assyria was Israel's dreaded enemy. It would be like you or me being called today to go to the capital of Iran or North Korea to preach the gospel there. Jonah was more concerned with his own nation's military security and way of life than he was with a city that was filled with spiritually lost people. And Jonah was such a racist that when the people of Nineveh repented and asked God to forgive them, he sat down under a tree and had a pity party for himself and complained to the Lord about God's mercy.

Tim Keller writes that when believers care more for their own interests, security, and nation than for the good and salvation of other races and nations, they are sinning like Jonah. If they value the economic and military flourishing of their own country over the good of the human race and the furtherance of God's work in the whole world, they are sinning like Jonah. Racial pride can turn into racism, and national pride can become imperialism.⁴

In our own country, we have seen examples of what happens when patriotism becomes nationalism and how dangerous it can be. For example, in the 1920s, millions of Americans bought into the lie that our nation's safety was in jeopardy because of the threat of black people. The movie *The Birth of a Nation* which was made in 1915, and which even found a screening in the White House, drove white people all over this country into a deep sense of fear which resulted in greater racial segregation and created an atmosphere where 60 million Americans joined the KKK. It promoted an ideology that was anti-black, anti-Catholic, anti-immigrant, and anti-Jew. Sadly, the effects of this sort of thing still exist in America today. Did you see where the number of refugees that are going to be allowed in this country has been reduced from 85,000 a year in 2016 to only 15,000 next year? Those are refugees like the Mustafa family our church sponsored to come to the U.S. a few years ago.

We must do better as a nation. We have to do better. True patriotism motivates improvement and calls for reform so that a nation can express its highest ideals and reflect its best values. And we must be realistic about our nation's shortcomings and when she fails. A father may love his son unconditionally, but that love doesn't mean that he is indifferent if the son is an alcoholic. The father's love motivates him to intervene and seek the welfare of his son and encourage him to get help. Otherwise his love is co-dependent and enabling, and when that happens, everyone in the family loses. The same is true for the citizens of a nation. We need to be careful when patriotism blinds us to the problems that exist, or we gloss over the sins we have committed, because when that happens, our patriotism becomes dangerous.

III. Patriotism that is Idolatry.

In his book *The Four Loves*, C.S. Lewis says that love of country becomes a demon when it becomes an idol. It's when we take a good thing like patriotism and make it an ultimate thing, so that our identity, our security, and our sense of self-worth is tied too much to who we are as Americans. Our love for country becomes protective and defensive, and it blinds us to our ability to see our failures and own our mistakes. We also become quick to demonize other nations and justify our actions which other countries universally condemn.

The most alarming example of patriotism that becomes idolatry in the last century is Nazi Germany, and the tragic fact is that the German church was co-opted into the nationalistic movement which led to a World War. In the 1930s, Hitler and the Nazis came to power and sought to create a Greater Germanic Reich, emphasizing ethnic Germanic identity and German greatness to the exclusion of other people. Eventually this led to the extermination of Jews, Poles, and others who were judged to be subhuman. And this resulted in the Holocaust of World War II.

In 1933, the German population was around 60 million people, and almost all of them identified themselves as Christians. Jewish people comprised less than one percent of the population. Most Christians in Germany welcomed the rise of Nazism in 1933, and despite its

obvious antisemitism, they were persuaded it would represent an expression of “positive Christianity” which affirmed their Christian values. How wrong the German church was.

Eventually the Nazi party took over the leadership of all the churches in Germany, and faithful believers like Dietrich Bonhoeffer created a “Confessing Church” which largely went underground. In addition, the Barmen Declaration was written to condemn the idolatry of this kind of patriotism. This statement of faith, which is part of ECO’s Book of Confessions, declared that the church’s allegiance is to Christ and to Scripture alone, not to any worldly *Fuhrer*. In essence they were saying, “We pledge our allegiance to the Lamb, not to any earthly government or leader. Christ is our King, and we will not bow our knees to anyone or any country but Him.”

It’s easy for us to think, “Oh, that could never happen here in the America.” However, I would suggest that is the same kind of overconfidence German Christians experienced in the 1930s. Never underestimate the power of the evil one. He seeks to divide and destroy. And history is filled with the stories of individuals and nations who became blind to how they were ultimately compromised when the affections of their hearts are at stake. Patriotism can become idolatry, so guard your heart and stay vigilant in keeping your loves rightly ordered, including your love of country.

Conclusion.

In Revelation 7 we are given a vision of heaven in which all the people of God who have known and loved Jesus throughout the world in all times and places are gathered around the throne of God. And we’re told that people from every nation, tribe, and language are there. They all are wearing white robes and holding palm branches in their hands, and they cry out in a loud voice, “*Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb*” (Rev. 7:9).

This is a picture of the church of Jesus Christ in heaven which is comprised of people from all nationalities, all counties, and all ethnic groups. Our unity and oneness in the Body of Christ supersedes our citizenship in or identification with any particular nation on earth, and our identity as followers of Jesus unites us into a heavenly family which is also described in Scripture as a holy nation in 1 Peter 2:9.

In 2010, I had the great privilege of being a delegate to the Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization in Cape Town, South Africa. Only 10 percent of the 400 delegates came from North America, and the rest were from the majority world. There I saw a glimpse of what heaven is going to be like, and it was a reflection of this picture in Revelation 7. It was a glorious multicultural, multinational, multiethnic, and multilingual gathering of worship and learning.

It was then I realized that I had more in common with my brothers and sisters from around the world who love and follow Jesus Christ than I did with my fellow Americans back home who don’t know the Lord. I also realized in a new way that my ultimate home is in heaven with Christ, not in America. And while I remain deeply grateful for my citizenship in this country and everything, I love about living here, I’m even more grateful for my citizenship in heaven and the global family of God which transcends nations.

Let us always remember that our ultimate allegiance is to Jesus Christ and to Him alone and may our love for country always be expressed in light of this higher love for Christ. The challenge for Christians is to simultaneously honor the virtues of sacrifice, service and

freedom without idolizing the sin of nationalism, to celebrate bravery without romanticizing violence, and to realize that our salvation comes from the Prince of Peace and not from the wars of humanity. May God bless each of us as we wrestle with these truths in the coming week and throughout this fall as we face a big election. To God be the glory. Amen.

¹ Ryan Hamm, "Patriotism and Christianity: What's the Difference Between Patriotism and Nationalism?" *Christianity Today*, *Christianbiblestudies.com*, accessed 9.28.2020, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/biblestudies/articles/churchhomeleadership/patriotism.html>.

² C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (New York: Harper Collins, 1960), p. 27.

³ Tim Keller, *The Prodigal Prophet* (New York: Viking Press, 2018), p. 177.

⁴ Tim Keller, p. 104.