

Old Testament Scripture: I Kings 20:22-30
New Testament Scripture Philippians 3:1-21

What does it mean to be a patriot of two countries and two kingdoms; our earthly country which is the United States of America and our spiritual country which is the Kingdom of God? To quote St. Augustine's classic work dealing with this question, The City of God, "what I (say), I (say) for the glory of the Kingdom of God, that, being placed in comparison with the other, it may shine with a brighter luster. (Bk. xiv c. 28).

The early Christians were faced with the meaning of patriotism. Many of them were Jews who had been converted to Christ. Of course, all the Apostles were Jews, and the first church congregation was in Jerusalem.

These were highly patriotic individuals who, like us, must have found it near impossible to keep separate the patriotism felt for their national homeland and their eternal home, the Kingdom of God.

One of the twelve Apostles was called Simon the Zealot. The Zealots were a highly patriotic faction among the Jews who bitterly opposed anything that was un-Jewish. They really loved their country and wanted to see its independence from Rome.

Many of the members of the church in Jerusalem were called zealots for the law. They advocated strict enforcement of the Jewish law because they felt it was essential for their national and religious identity.

Perhaps the epitome of Jewish patriotism can be seen in a proud Jew by the name of Saul whom we all know as the Apostle Paul. He wrote concerning his patriotism, "If any other man thinketh that he hath whereof he might trust in the flesh, I more: Circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, an Hebrew of the Hebrews; as touching the law, a Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the church; touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless." (Phil. 3:4-5)

I imagine that most of us fit that description fairly well except for the difference of nearly two-thousand years and nationality. "I am an American, from the state of Delaware (the first state); an American whose forefathers were native born Americans from at least the late eighteenth century."

Paul, however, did not stop at that point. He goes on to say, "But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss....for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord." (Phil. 3:4-6)

Whatever pride Paul had in his Jewish heritage was subordinated not to Lord Caesar, but to the Lord Jesus Christ. He was always proud of his Jewishness as he was of His Roman citizenship, but he used it only as a means to further the Kingdom of God.

Christians have always believed that patriotism has its value only when subordinated to God. Our own pledge of Allegiance reminds us that we are "one nation under God." That means the purpose of God and His Kingdom transcends that of our country and the two must not be confused. Whenever the priorities have been reversed there have always been Hitlers, Stalins, Ho Chi Minhs, and Fidel Castors to claim that total obedience that we owe to God alone.

The Christian realizes that he is first of all a citizen of the Kingdom of God from whom all subordinate power and authority is derived, for the Scripture says, "By me kings reign, and princes decree justice. By me princes rule, and nobles, even all the judges of the earth." (Pro. 8:15-16)

Paul reminded the Christians of Philippi of this fact when he wrote his Epistle to them. The city was highly patriotic. It had proven its loyalty to Rome over the years. Its inhabitants had fought and died for Rome at the battles of Philippi (42 B.C.) and Actium (31 B.C.). As a result of their loyalty to Rome, Rome conferred full-fledged Roman citizenship on all Philippians.

It is against this background that Paul warns the Philippian Christians to keep their patriotism in proper perspective. He writes, "Our commonwealth is in heaven (not in Rome) and from it we await a savior (not Caesar) but the Lord Jesus Christ." (3:20) The word translated "conversation" in the King James Version and "commonwealth" in the Revised Standard Version of the Bible is a word that denotes a colony of foreigners whose citizenship is someplace other than where they live.

We, like the Philippians, have a right to be proud of our American citizenship, but in a very real sense we are strangers and exiles. As the old Gospel hymn has it, "This world is not my home, I'm just a-passing through."

Our salvation, security, and independence will not come ultimately from Washington or, much less, on the battle fields of Viet-Nam. Rather, as the Psalmist has written, "In God is my salvation and my glory: the rock of my strength, and my refuge, is in God." (62:7)

As citizens of the United States as well as of the Kingdom of God we have divided loyalties. We must obey the laws and customs of our country. We must not offend or mock the President, Congress, or Supreme Court even when we are in bitter disagreement with them, though we must voice our disapproval with injustice.

Perhaps United Presbyterians would do well to follow the example of the Reformed Presbyterian Church, which, though allowing its membership to vote and hold public office; encourages dissent from "all immoral civil institutions."

The members, many of whom are direct descendents of the Scottish Covenanters, fully realizing that our nation is not a Christian nation, pledge themselves according to their constitution to "pray and labor for the peace and welfare of our country, and for its reformation by a constitutional recognition of God as the source of all power, of Jesus Christ as the Ruler of Nations, of the Holy Scriptures as the supreme rule, and of the true Christian religion."

I believe that one of the greatest problems facing the United States today is not racial prejudice or poverty, or even the War in Viet-Nam, pollution, or unemployment, but the loss of a patriotic perspective among Christians.

On one hand there are those who obey neither God or man and end up obeying only their own worst irrational impulses. When respect and honor for those in authority under God is rejected freedom is exchanged for license and the right to dissent is perverted into disruption and destruction.

But patriotism can get out of hand on the other extreme. There are those who advocate a patriotism which not only conflicts but opposes the law of God revealed in the Scripture. It was to this situation that St. Augustine wrote to distinguish the chief characteristics of the city of our nation and the city of God. He says, "These two cities were made by two loves: the earthly city by the love of self unto the contempt of God, and the heavenly city by the love of God unto the contempt of self." (Bk. Xiv C. 28)

I believe this is what we have to be careful of because if we are not we soon begin to do one of two things. Either we, out of the love of self, identify the political, economic, and military actions of the United States with the will of God, or, out of contempt of God, we completely ignore his revealed will to guide its deliberations and actions. In either case we forsake the true God for the god of nationalism.

Almost without exception, the pagan gods were national gods. The pagan kings claimed divine support for all their military and political actions. For example, one time the mighty Syrian army gathered together to fight Israel. In the words of our Old Testament lesson, "And it came to pass at the return of the year, that Benhadad numbered the Syrians, and went unto Aphek, to fight against Israel."

(I Kgs. 20:26)

-3- the gods of the hills

The Syrian army vastly outnumbered the Israelites so that the Bible says, "the children of Israel pitched before them like two little flocks of kids; but the Syrians filled the country." (I Kgs. 20:26)

The Syrians were confident of winning because they were fighting Israel in the valleys where their gods supposedly were better able to fight. They mocked Israel by saying, "Jehovah (the God of Israel) Is God of the (Judean) hills, but he is not God of the valleys." (I Kgs. 20:28)

But the Psalmist wrote, "I lift up mine eyes unto the hills." Does my help come from the hills he asks. "From whence cometh my help?" It does not come from the hills as the Syrians were hoping, rather, "My help cometh from the Lord who made heaven and earth." (Psa. 121)

Whenever we, or any nation, claim the God of heaven and earth as our own private national God or look anywhere else but to Him for our help, salvation, and independence, we are committing national idolatry. We are worshipping the gods of the hills or the valleys but not the God who made heaven and earth.

Again the prophet Amos warned his highly patriotic kinsmen, "Are ye not as children of the Ethiopians unto me, O children of Israel? Have not I brought up Israel out of the land of Egypt? and the Philistines from Caphtor and the Syrians from Kir?"

God did bring our Calvinistic forefathers to America who undertook that dangerous voyage primarily, in the words of the Mayflower Compact, "for the glorie of God, and advancemente of the Christian faith...." Just as He has given us this land for an heritage so also has He brought to power all the governments of the world to fulfill his purposes in history. God is not the patron of any nation. He is the absolutely sovereign God who ordains whatsoever comes to pass. He has given the United States its independence and it is within His power, alone, to take it away.

The metrical version of Psalm 100, composed by Isaac Watts, expresses this truth with the lofty words, "Before Jehovah's awful throne, Ye nations, bow with sacred joy; Know that the Lord is God alone, He can create, and He destroy; He can create, And He destroy."

Patriotism must never equate the United States with the chosen people of God, for he has chosen a people out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation, and has made them a kingdom...and they shall reign forever. (Rev. 5:9, 10)

Patriotism must be kept in second place and never confused with Christianity because the United States will not reign supreme forever. One day there will be no more Communist or Imperialist threats and exploitations, for the nations of this world are passing away. The future belongs to the Kingdom of God. As the Psalmist wrote, "Thy throne, O lord, is forever." (45:6)

Why then should we be patriotic at all? For a very simple reason. This is our country. I love my native state of Delaware, not because it was the first state in the Union, not because of its colonial heritage, not because of its beauty and wealth, but because I was born and raised there.

Patriotism stems from the Latin word "Patria" which means "Fatherland". God never meant respect of fathers to be dependent upon their strength, age, or even their just or unjust actions. We are to respect our parents even if they are disrespectful, simply because they are our parents.

Are we to love our parents when they are strong, but not if they are weak; when they are healthy but not when they are sick? Are we to love them when they are loving, kind, and fair, but hate them when they are unjust, unfair, and show favoritism? of course not. Love has no such conditions.

If we love America for her military strength we will most certainly misuse that strength. If we love America for her economic strength we will most certainly disregard ethical considerations to maintain our status. Those whose patriotism depends on the goodness of our heritage will, most certainly, distort history to preserve myths.

But a man who loves America because it is his country will love it whether it is weak or strong, healthy or sick, and whether its history is spotless or soiled. As G. K. Chesterton wrote, "A true Christian who loves his country must be patriotic enough to die for it but Christian enough to die to it."

He is one whose total obedience to God gives him a responsibility to keep his eyes open to any sickness or weakness in his country while at the same time loving it enough to think it worth healing, strengthening, and making beautiful.

No doctor would look at a patient and say, "I love you so much that I will overlook your sickness. Likewise, no one who loves his country will allow his patriotism to blind him to its weaknesses or prevent him from re-examining where it is going.

Though we are to love our country as a son loves his father, God is Lord over every nation, and, in the words of Herman Melville, "...Delight is to him,.... who acknowledges no law or lord, but the Lord his God, and is only a patriot to heaven."

Now unto the blessed and only POTentate, the King of kings, and Lord of lords; who only hath immortality, dwelling in the light which no man can approach unto; whom no man hath seen nor can see: to whom be honor and power everlasting, Amen.