

“Where Is Our Loyalty”
Scripture: Philippians 3:4-11

Today is a day set apart to remember with thankfulness the ultimate expression of patriotism that many men and women have had to pay as the price of freedom.

I believe that it is good to look, therefore, at what it means to be a patriotic citizen from the viewpoint of the Christian faith.

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 early Christians were highly patriotic individuals who must have found it near impossible to separate their faith from their patriotism.

One of the twelve apostles was called Simon the Zealot. The Zealots were a highly patriotic political party among the Jews who bitterly opposed anything that was un-Jewish. They really loved their country and longed for its freedom.

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

Perhaps the epitome of Jewish patriotism can be seen in a proud Jewish patriot by the name of Saul who we all know as the Apostle Paul.

Paul writes 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 the law; blameless.”

I imagine that most of us fit that description fairly well except for the difference of nearly 2000 years and nationality.

“I am American, from the state of Delaware (the first state); an American born in America from parents who have been American citizens for generations; as to zeal I bitterly opposed anyone who tries to destroy our country; and I try to strictly observe the laws of the land.”

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 Christ. Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord.” (Philippians 3:4-6)

For Paul, whatever pride he had in his citizenship was subordinated, not to Moses or to Judaism, nor to Lord Caesar, but to the Lord Christ.

Paul was always proud of his Jewish heritage but he did not allow that pride to usurp the throne of God.

Christians have always believed that patriotism has its value only when it is under God. Our own pledge of Allegiance to the flag reminds us that we are “one nation under God.” That means the purpose of God transcends the purpose of our country and the two must not be confused.

Whether in Rome, Jerusalem, or Portsmouth, Ohio; whether 2000 years ago or May 30, 1970, patriotism must be clearly in second place to our loyalty to Christ. In fact, whenever patriotism takes priority over God there have always been Hitler’s, Stalin’s, Ho Chi Minh’s, and Fidel Castro’s to claim that total obedience that we owe to God alone.

The Christian citizen realizes that he is first of all a citizen of the Kingdom of God from whom comes all power and authority. For he says, ‘By me kings reign, and princes decree justice. By me princes rule, and nobles, even all the judges of the earth.’ (Proverbs 8:15-16)

Paul reminded the Christians of Philippi of this fact when he wrote his Epistle to them. The citizens of Philippi were highly patriotic. They have over the years proven their loyalty to Rome. They had fought and died for Rome, against those who were trying to overthrow the government, at the battles of Philippi and Actium. AS a result of their patriotism Rome conferred full-fledged Roman citizenship on all Philippians.

There was a tremendous pride in being able to call themselves Romans, though they were Greeks. It was the kind of pride that many Greek, Irish, and Italian immigrants must have felt when they became American citizens.

It is against this background that Paul warns the Philippians to keep their patriotism in the proper perspective. He writes, “Our citizenship is in heaven (not in Rome) and from it (not Caesar) we await a savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.” (Philippians 3:5)

No, like the Philippians, have a right to be proud of our American citizenship, but in a very real sense we are strangers and exiles here on earth. AS the old gospel hymn has it, “This world is not my home. I’m just a passing through.”

Our salvation and the salvation of our country will not come ultimately, from Washington or even on the battlefield of Vietnam. Rather, as the Psalmist says, “In God is my salvation and my glory: the rock of my strength, and my refuge, is in God.” (Psalm 62:7)

AS citizens of the United States as well as citizens 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 on both sides of the issues.

One of the confessions that has guided the Presbyterian Church is the Second Helvetic Confession written in the sixteenth century, which expresses the duty which citizens give their national leader.

It says, “Let them love him, favor him, and pray for him as their father; and let them obey all his just, and fair commands. Finally let them pay all customs and taxes, and all other such dues faithfully and willingly. And if the public safety of the country and justice requires it, and the magistrate of necessity wages war, let them even lay down their life and pour out their blood for the public safety...”

Yes, when the public safety requires it we are to willingly give our lives for our country.

Yet, directly, following on the heels of this statement is the reminder that Christians are nevertheless citizens of the Commonwealth of Heaven who have as their sole ruler, Jesus Christ.

Therefore, we must always be ready to say with the Apostle Paul, “It is better to obey God than man.” When the state demands of us what is contrary to the revealed will of God we must obey God rather than our patriotic feelings.

I believe that one of the greatest problems facing the United States today is not racial prejudice or poverty, or even the war in Vietnam, but the loss of patriotic perspective.

On one hand we hear people screaming that it is better to obey neither God or man, and have ended up obeying only their own worst irrational impulses.

Yet on the other hand there are those who are urging a kind of patriotism that even outstrips obedience and loyalty to God.

When patriotism is rejected you end up with anarchy, hatred, and destruction. Those who follow this course of action hate the United States because it falls short of the righteousness and justice of the Kingdom of God. Therefore, they have exchanged freedom for license and perverted the right to dissent into disruption and destruction.

I don't have to speak further on this lamentable rejection of patriotism. Little good will come of castigating people who are not here. It would be like castigating the congregation on Sunday

morning for the evils of not attending church. Those who need to hear it aren't there and those who do hear are tempted to become self-righteous.

But patriotism can get out of hand on the other extreme. I believe this is what we have to be careful of because if we are not we soon begin to identify the political economic, and military actions of the United States with the will of God and the Kingdom of Heaven.

God constantly warned the ancient Jews against idolatry and forsaking the true God for the god of the nations.

Almost without exception, the pagan gods were national gods and gods of the land. 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. AS the Bible says, "And it came to pass at the return of the year, that Benhadad numbered the Syrians, and went up to Aphek, to fight against Israel." (1 Kings 20:26)

The Syrian army vastly outnumbered the Israelites so the Bible says, "the children of Israel pitched before them like two little flocks of kids; but the Syrians filled the country." (1 Kings 20:26)

The Syrians were confident of winning because they were fighting Israel in the valleys where their gods lived.

The Syrians mocked Israel by saying, "The Lord is God of the hills, but he is not God of the valleys." (1 Kings 20:28)

The Psalmist said, "I live up mine eyes unto the hills"—does my help come from the hills he asks. "From whence cometh my help?" My help does not come from the hills as the Syrians claimed, rather, "my help cometh from the Lord who made heaven and earth." (Psalm 121)

Whenever we or any nation claim the God of Heaven and Earth as our own private nations god we are committing national idolatry. We are worshipping the gods of the valleys or the hills 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 forefathers to America to develop and settle it. But God has done the same for England, France, Russia, and the modern state of Israel. He desires their salvation just as much as he does ours.

God is Lord over every nation, and it is only by his decree that any man wields authority.

It is true that ancient Israel was the chosen people of God, but their election was not based on their nationality or even upon their choice, for as Christ said ‘Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you...’

Patriotism must never equate the United States with the chosen people of God. God today 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. (Revelation 5:9-10)

Patriotism must be kept in second place because the United States will not reign forever. One day there will be no more Russian, Chinese, or Communist threat. For the nations of this world are passing away.

The future belongs to the kingdom of God. As the Psalmist says, “Thy throne, O lord, is forever.” (Psalm 45:6)

Why then should we be patriotic at all? I consider myself to be a patriotic citizen of the United States for a very simple reason.

I am patriotic because this is my 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 or wealth, but because it is my home.

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 actions.

We are to respect our parents even if they are disrespectful to others simply because they are our parents.

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

If we love America because it is free, we might allow everything done in the name of freedom.

Those whose patriotism depends on the heritage of the United States very well might permit his patriotism to color history.

But a man who loves America because it is America and because it is his country will love it whether it is weak or strong, whether it is healthy or sick, and whether its history is spotless or soiled.

A true Christian who loves his country must be patriotic enough to die for it but Christian enough to die for 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 his country 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 themselves in his country or prevent him from re-examining where it is going.

In conclusion, I would like to hold up as a final example of this kind of patriotism I have been talking about, the Patriarch Abraham. In the book of Hebrews we read, “By faith Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance, obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he went. By faith he sojourned in the land of promise, as in a strange country, dwelling in tabernacles with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise: For he looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God.” (Hebrews 11:8-10)

Let us love America, be thankful on this Memorial Day for those who have died for our country, for this truly is a land of promise, but let us, like Abraham, “sojourn in our land of promise, as in a strange country” constantly looking forward and pressing on to the city which hath foundations whose builder and maker is God.

His large and great dominion shall
from sea to sea extend:
It from the river shall reach forth
unto earth's utmost end.

They in the wilderness that dwell
bow down before him must;
And they that are his enemies
shall lick the very dust.
The kings of Tarshish, and the isles,
to him shall presents bring;
And unto him shall offer gifts
Sheba's and Sheba's king.

Yea, all the might kings on earth
before him down shall fall;
And all the nations of the world
do service to him shall.

His name for ever shall endure;
1st like the sun it shall:
Men shall be bledd'd in him, and
bless'd
all nations shall him call