

Should a Christian be Patriotic?

March 13, 2016

Brian R. Wipf

The question for our sermon this morning is this: Should Christians be patriotic? If I understand my audience well, this is pretty close to a no-brainer. Most of us here are thinking, "Of course Christians should be patriotic!" We are patriotic people. It's a badge of honor; it's a cultural value. And I think that's true for much of our broader culture, too. Every 4th of July we prove our patriotism by blowing stuff up; that's how much we love our country!

So, why am I bringing this up? You must be a little suspicious; if the answer is so obvious (yes, Christians should be patriotic) why are we wasting time on such a easy question? To get an idea as to why this is an important question to talk about, listen to some common definitions of patriotism. Here are just a few that I found.

- Love of country and willingness to sacrifice for it
- Love and devotion to one's country
- Devoted love for country; national loyalty

Hear those words; *love and devotion, sacrifice and loyalty*. That last definition even combines two words; *devoted love*. Here's the point; those are pretty powerful words. I would even call them religious words. What I mean by religious is that those words describe something about our hearts, our commitments. Those words get to the core of who we are as individuals.

The Bible uses these words to describe what our worship to God should be like. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength." "Worship the Lord your God and *him only* shall you serve." Paul wants his churches to have "undivided devotion to the Lord" (1 Cor. 7:35) and to maintain a "sincere and pure devotion to Christ" (2 Cor. 11:3). Loyalty is big to Jesus, too; "if you are ashamed of me before men I will be ashamed of you before my Father in heaven." Peter was disloyal to Jesus denying him three times the night he was betrayed. We're supposed to give God our undivided love and devotion, loyalty and sacrifice.

So, let's ask that question again, but with a little context. If all my love and devotion should be given to Christ (if my love for God is to be undivided, pure like the Bible says), can I be patriotic, too? Can I be devoted to God and country? That's an important question for us. Many of you have expressed to me concern and confusion about the current state of our political climate. You have concerns because you love your country. But you love God. Can we love both? Should we love both? And how do they fit together?

I would say patriotism for a believer isn't a switch that should be either on or off (you either are patriotic or you're not); instead, it's a dial. Dials aren't merely switches; dials regulate how much. How much passion, loyalty, devotion should we have for country? Do you know what I mean? If patriotism is a switch, the question is simply, "Should we be patriotic or not?" It's all or nothing. The better question is, "How patriotic should I be as a follower of Jesus?" "How strong

should my love, devotion and loyalty be?" The challenge is discerning how intensely and passionately we should be for our country. That's a taste of where we are going.

The first thing I want to do is answer the question in the affirmative; I want to give you reasons why you should have patriotism. A word that I didn't find so much in the definitions and descriptions of patriotism, but absolutely fits, is the word *gratitude*. The reason why we should be happily patriotic is because God has made us to be grateful people. And one of the things we ought to be grateful for is the country God has given to us.

Can we get a little interactive this morning? Shout out a word or phrase of what we can be thankful for when it comes to our country? We're Americans; what should Americans be thankful for? (i.e. freedom of worship/speech; high quality of life; faithful service men and women)

Turn with me to Acts 17 (READ vs. 24-27). Notice how this passage brings so many of our themes together. First, God is the giver of everything in life. Vs. 25b, "since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything." Everything you have, my brothers and sisters, including all the good that comes to us through our country is a gift of God. Praise His name! Give him glory! This list that we have made is the result of God's good grace. He's due our thanks.

Secondly, notice the focus on God's providential formation of nations in vs. 26; "And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling places." Before time began, at the foundation of the world, God conceived of our nation; he planned our country. He made it. He purposed it. And he put you in it. Now, he did the same thing for every other nation, too. That's not unique to us. God did this for every nation in every age. We again are reminded of God's sovereignty over our nation and every nation. So, if God made it, if he purposed it, all the good we get from it should result in thanks to God. For a Christian, patriotism flows from a love for God. God has given us a good gift, our country; we thank him for it as we celebrate what we have together.

But finally, we learn why God makes nations in vs. 27; "that they [nations/people] should seek God, in the hope that they might feel their way toward him and find him." That verse serves a very important point. I've heard for many years people, growing in sadness and discouragement over the direction of our country, ask, "Why? Why is God allowing this? Why is this happening?" I think there are reasons to be discouraged; but there are reasons to be encouraged, too. But either way, in all the good and in all the bad we can have confidence from vs. 27 that God is working *his saving purposes*. Nations rise and fall, good leaders go and horrible leaders come, cultures form and then self-destruct by God's design *for the salvation of sinners*. God determines the times, the places, the events of nations for the gracious and kind purpose of saving more people.

Remembering his redemptive purpose is critical. God's goal in nation creating and dismantling is the salvation of sinners. Oftentimes, my friends, our nationalistic and patriotic feelings neglect that. God's doesn't share the patriotic concerns of making America great God's not trying to make us feel proud to be Americans though there are reasons to be proud. Something bigger is at work. All that has happened, is happening and will happen to the good ol' US of A (for good or bad) is worked by God to bring sinners to their knees where they humbly confess Jesus as Lord.

I think there are reasons to be happy and thankful about our country and reasons to be ashamed about some of our history and sad about our sins. You can be a Patriot and still be honest about what we are discouraged by. That kind of honesty helps us keep our patriotism in check. But keep the big picture in mind; God's picture. He's working to save sinners. So, when justice prevails and our nation flourishes, he's using it to save sinners. When our beloved country is going in the wrong direction and we're discouraged, take heart. God is using this to save sinners. Be happy in it all; God is working to save sinners. And let that joy in God's redemptive purposes take a more predominant place in your hearts than the sadness you may feel for going in the wrong direction nationally.

But when is the patriotic dial turned too intensely? We've established there's good reason to have love, loyalty and devotion to country. God has given many good gifts to us that come to us in the form of our national inheritance. But when has our love, loyalty and devotion to country grown too intensely? Can that happen? Can one be inappropriately patriotic? Or let's use religious language: When is patriotism a sin?

To try and discern this question, I want us to consider our flags this morning. We've got flags here at FBC. You see to your right the American Flag. We all know that one. And to your left we have the Christian Flag. Both flags have a pledge. We know the pledge to the US flag. Just listen to the opening phrase: "I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America and to the republic for which it stands...." Hear the phrase *for which it stands*. The flag stands, it represents our country, our republic. Yes, we are pledging allegiance to the flag, but what's underneath the flag, behind the flag, is the nation, the republic. That's what we really are pledging allegiance to.

Listen to the opening line of the pledge to the Christian flag: "I pledge allegiance to the Christian flag and to the Savior for whose kingdom it stands." So this flag stands to represent the Savior and his Kingdom. Both flags represent something; the US flag represents our republic, our nation, our democracy and people. The Christian flag represents the Savior and his kingdom; all of his power, grace, goodness and truth.

So, you got that? You now know what both flags represent according to their pledges. I'm guessing you also all know that there is flag etiquette. There's a right way to display flags. There's a right way to fold the flag, drape the flag and display the flag. These rules are actually

established in a Federal Code, Public Law 93-344. There are not fines or punishments if you get it wrong, but there's a right way and wrong way.

And there's a right way to display the US flag with other flags. And do you know what those rules say? They say that the US flag should never be flown in submission to another flag. The US flag always gets the position of honor; it's always the highest flag; it's always the flag to the right, which is the place of honor. It always gets the superior position. There's an odd naval exception to this rule; when a Navy church service happening, the flag doesn't need to be preeminently displayed, but otherwise it's always supposed to be given the highest honor.

When you put these two flags together, does that sound right to you? Should the flag that represents the USA be given the preeminent place of honor, should it be flown higher and with greater distinction than the flag the represents our Savior and his Kingdom? Should the Christian flag be flown in submission to Old Glory? Within a church building? When the people of God are gathered together, should the US flag fly higher than a symbol of our Savior? That shouldn't sit well with you.

I use this merely to illustrate a point (I'm not going to suggest some anti-flag demonstration or anything): to me, this is a great example of how patriotism can become sin. When your love, devotion, loyalty and sacrifice for anything takes the prominent place in your heart and life, when love of country becomes greater than your love for God, that's a problem. We heard earlier; our devotion to God is to be undivided, it's to be pure. We can't have two masters, two loves. God alone should receive our highest allegiance and worship. The dial can absolutely be turned too high.

I'm wondering if you're tempted to minimize this concern; "I would never love my country more than my God!" I'm not surprised by anyone saying such a thing, but the commitments of our hearts are much more complicated than that. I'm guessing most of us married-men would say, "I love my wife more than I love my friends." Yet, I've encountered too many men who would rather talk with their buddies, drink with their buddies and have fun with their friends. They speak more honestly and kindly to their buddies, too, while their wives have given up a long time ago of having an intimate relationship with their husbands. Oftentimes, our actions betray our words. And if I could so humbly say, from my limited perspective, it seems to me that many followers of Jesus have let their commitment, their love, loyalty and devotion to country take too prominent a place in their hearts. Finding the right balance is really hard, isn't it? I get it; I'm with you. I struggle knowing how strongly and passionately I should participate in political solutions in the pursuit of a just society. But I think we know we're out of balance when we're focused more on the things of earth rather than the things above. I think we know we're out of balance when we regularly sin in our thoughts, words and deeds against those who think differently than us politically. When we are overcome by fear of what might become of our country rather than being overcome by our fear of God, that's a sign that we're breaking the 1st commandment: "Have no other gods, no other commitments, loyalties or loves before me," says the Lord.

Let me address one more temptation, the temptation to mix patriotism and faith. It's really easy to do. In fact, some of you might not like my flag analogy; you might say, "The pledge allegiance says itself 'under God'". Yes, I know. There are all kinds of religious phrases, mottos and references in our national conscience. But that doesn't make them good. In fact, sometimes these religious references can make it appear that everything we do as a country has the divine approval of God. That's entirely false.

The Nazis did a lot of this. They would hijack religious words and phrases and use them in their political propaganda. They mixed faith and country. The reason is obvious; if God is for Germany, how can anyone be against us? If God blesses the government, how can anyone oppose them? Listen to this reworked verse to Silent Night done by the Nazis, a song that's supposed to celebrate the birth of Jesus.

*Silent night! Holy night! All is calm, and all is bright.
Only the Chancellor steadfast in fight.
Watches o'er Germany by day and by night.
Always caring for us.*

That's pretty scary. Jesus is replaced by the Fuhrer. There's a mixing of politics and faith that is not ok. We must learn the difference between political convictions and faith convictions. It's not bad to have political convictions; we should have them (who doesn't have them?). But those are different than biblical convictions. Our biblical convictions might shape our political convictions. My biblical convictions on the sanctity of human life governs my position on abortion, racism and even welfare. What my Bible tells me about Creation informs my political convictions about the environment. So, our biblical convictions inform our politics, but they are still different. We must learn to see the difference between the two and with God's grace and wisdom we can.

I want to end by encouraging you one last time with some words of Paul Schneider, the German pastor who stood up against Nazism and was killed for it. In 1923, 10 years before Hitler became Chancellor in Germany, Paul Schneider wrote a letter to his father-in-law on his birthday. His father-in-law was discouraged about the direction of his country like some of you are. Listen to these wise and biblical words from Schneider; they should be a tremendous help to you as you keep seeking Christ during our present age (he was 26 when he wrote these words) (READ pg. 51).

Small Group Questions

Sermon series: In God We Trust

Mar. 13, 2016 ~ Should a Christian be Patriotic?

1. How patriotic are you? (i.e. fireworks? Flag in your front yard? Star-spangled banner pajamas?) How or where did your patriotism (or lack thereof) come from?
2. Read together Acts 17:24-28 and answer the following questions.
 - a. In quick fashion, list the ways Paul describes God in these verses. What is he trying to communicate about God?
 - b. If God made every nation of mankind, what does that say about nations? (*i.e. good or bad? Divine purpose or no divine purpose?*)
 - c. What does vs. 27 say about God's purpose in nation building? What does this tell you about God and his plan to save human beings? Does this raise our confidence and joy in God? Lessen it? What's significant about God's plan? (*ANS. He wants mankind to be saved.*)
 - d. How should this passage inform our view and understanding of our own country?
3. Share with one another reasons why you are thankful to God for our country?
4. How does remembering God's redemptive purposes change the way we interact and view the changing cultural and political circumstances in our country?
5. Brian quoted two verses that say we should have "undivided devotion to the Lord" (1 Cor. 7:35) and a "sincere and pure devotion to Christ." Is it possible to have devotion to both Christ and country? Or Christ and spouse or kids, for that matter? How does that work?
6. When might be times and what might be ways we're tempted to give country preeminence over Christ and his Gospel?
7. What was the most important thing you heard today in the sermon?