

My Country 'Tis of Thee

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Isn't it striking how many people are so anguished about "our great country" today? "I want my country back again," they shout. "Don't take our country away from us," their signs read as they demonstrate.

This is a good time for Christians to think about what the phrase "my country" means for us as followers of Jesus Christ. As a Christian, what do you think of as "your country"?

St. Peter on Being Born . . . and Growing Up

My favorite New Testament character (after Jesus, of course) is Peter. In his first letter he commends his readers for being born again and launching their Christian life: "You have been born again, not of perishable but of imperishable seed, through the living and enduring word of God" (1 Peter 1:23). Very cool. Totally reborn through the Word of God.

But then Peter goes on to write: "Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk so that by it you may grow into salvation, if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good" (*1 Peter 2:2-3). So the point is that being born again is the first step; that is supposed to be followed by growing up. Christians are not supposed to remain childish and infantile.

Peter then focuses on two topics: the first one is church; the second topic is country (nation, political life). The logic of his argument is impossible to miss. Christians remain immature and childish if they don't grow up in their understanding of those two topics. I'll leave church for another day's discussion; the main points are that church isn't about buildings and it isn't about entertaining you; it's about coming together to praise God. If you never understand that about church, you remain in the crib as a Christian.

Here is how Peter describes the second aspect of mature discipleship: "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you might proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light; Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; Once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

"Beloved, I urge you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul. Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles [nations] so that, though they may malign you as evildoers, they may see your honorable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge.

"For the Lord's sake, accept the authority of every human institution, whether of the emperor as supreme, or of governors as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right. For it is God's will that by doing right you should silence the ignorance of the foolish. As servants of God, live as free people, yet do not use your freedom as pretext for evil. Honor everyone. Love the family of believers. Fear God. Honor the emperor." (1 Peter 2: 9-17).

My Country is the Kingdom of God

Here is the basic message: Christians are citizens of another country, another nation, another kingdom. Christians cannot view themselves in any primary sense as American, French, Canadian, Swedish, Chinese, or any other nation of the world. As Paul writes "our citizenship is in heaven" (Philippians 3:20). When Christians sing "My country 'tis of thee" our first thought is not of the USA but of the kingdom of God. If that isn't our primary way of thinking, then we have yet to get out of the crib as infant Christians.

Jesus came into the world proclaiming the "kingdom of God." He preached it, told parables about, explained it, recruited for it. "Seek first the kingdom of God," he said (Matthew 6:33). The Greek word he used --- *basilea* --- is the normal Greek word for kingdom --- it isn't a special religious or spiritual or

metaphorical concept. It refers to wherever God is acknowledged and followed as king. --- that's where it is. This is no small point to skip over: by choosing this language Jesus threw down a political challenge.

As if it might not be clear enough what's going on, Paul uses not just the kingdom vocabulary but also picked the Greek word *ecclesia* to describe the church (from which we get words like "ecclesiastical," meaning churchly). Did you know that this Greek word *ecclesia* meant "political assembly" or "assembly of citizens"? Literally *ecclesia* means "called out." It referred to the calling together of citizens in the *polis*. Why didn't Paul refer to the church as the "new synagogue" or the "new spiritual group"? Why did he call it the "political group of citizens" (*ecclesia*)? Are you getting the message here?

I Pledge Allegiance to the Cross

Christians must not pledge unconditional allegiance to any flag, whether American or otherwise. No! We pledge allegiance to the cross, to the Lord and kingdom for which it stands, one nation, throughout the world and across history, with gospel and redemption for all. It is our task to live faithfully and loyally under our king and under our constitution (Holy Scripture). All other worldly political talk and thinking is way down the priority list compared to this reality. To invest our hopes and dreams in a worldly nation is a betrayal of our real kingdom. It is asking far too much of that worldly nation; and it is selling out our eternal nation.

Jesus said "My kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36). The character of God's kingdom is very different; our values, our ends, and our means are different. It is a lifetime challenge to live out those kingdom values. But live them out we must for God's kingdom is very much *in* the world even though it is not *of* the world. Citizens of God's kingdom are pilgrims and exiles living in a strange land; but they are also "ambassadors for Christ" (II Corinthians 5:20). They are not "of the earth" but they are the "salt of the earth" and the "light of the world."

Christians have a role to play in the world that no one else can carry out. We are here (in the USA or wherever) to represent our king and his message and values. We are not here to take over, we are here to serve. The very best thing we can do for the USA and the rest of the world is not form a religious "Amen corner" for one party or another, but to join other Christians in bearing witness in word and deed to the third way, the other way, of Jesus Christ.

Getting Our Nations Straight

The worst thing we can do is confuse a worldly nation like the USA with the kingdom of God. The USA has been deeply influenced and "salted" by the kingdom of God (and for that we can be very grateful) but it is not, never has been, and never will be a "Christian nation" in any meaningful sense. And it is wrong to try to make it so. Whoever said that any nation of the world could be like a church, putting in place biblical standards and expecting them to be observed in the absence of the Holy Spirit? Whoever said that Caesar (in any form or era) was capable of being the guardian of marriage or education or our values? Those who want the American Caesar to protect their view of marriage or prayer are asking the impossible. It doesn't really change things decisively if the President or other political leaders of a worldly nation are themselves Christian believers: they cannot turn a kingdom of the world into the kingdom of God.

Well-meaning Christians have quoted the statement of II Chronicles 7:14 as though it applies to a worldly nation like the USA: "If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land." Sorry friends, this is addressed to Israel, to the people of the Covenant who are called by God's name. This was not addressed to Egypt or Babylon. The USA and other worldly nations are today's "Egypt" and "Babylon." The church of believing men and women who have confessed Jesus Christ --- that is today's "Israel." This isn't just my opinion. It is the consistent teaching of the Bible.

What Happens If We Forget Our Country

So I'm not very concerned about a judge that doesn't allow a posting of the Ten Commandments in a worldly court house --- but I'm very concerned about the churches whose pastors and leaders can't recite, don't teach, and don't understand those very same Ten Commandments.

I am not surprised that a worldly state and court system doesn't view marriage the way the Bible does --- but I am stunned by the blindness of today's churches and pastors when it comes to that biblical teaching about marriage, divorce, and related issues.

I am not surprised that worldly nations get involved in wars and rumors of wars at the drop of a hat --- but I am deeply saddened by a church that jumps up so often to lead the cheering for the use of weapons of the flesh and forgets almost totally its weapons of the Spirit.

I am not surprised at the popularity in worldly nations like the USA or Iran of demonizing, bullying, and hating political and national enemies --- but it is nothing less than tragic that citizens of the kingdom of Jesus Christ find it so difficult to love the enemy, to do good to those who persecute, to reach out and show hospitality to the stranger.

The fact is that most Christians get their political identity and values from the cultures and neighborhoods in which they live --- not from the Bible or the Kingdom of God. And their pastors seem mostly incapable of teaching what the Bible teaches on matters of politics, citizenship, economics, and the affairs of life. They might be good at helping people get born again --- but not so good at helping those infants mature. Pretty good at the inner life and after life, but pretty weak on Kingdom life in the midst of the worldly nations.

Some day we will all give an account, especially those who teach.