

ΤΩ ΧΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

“In the Nick of Time”

Occasional Essays
and Other Stuff
for Christian Students

Presented by the
President of

Central Baptist
Theological Seminary
of Minneapolis

American Christianity needs leaders. American Christianity needs *Christian* leaders. Christian leaders explain the Scriptures, bringing them to bear upon life's urgent questions. Christian leaders exemplify the life of faith, finding their ultimate satisfaction in God alone. They unite intellectual discipline with ordinate affection, turning their entire being toward the love of God. These essays are dedicated to the task of inviting today's Christian students to become tomorrow's Christian leaders.

—Kevin T. Bauder

“...Be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine.”

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The Christian and Patriotism

Part One

During late June or early July, American Christians bedeck their churches with red, white, and blue. They lift their voices in hymns of praise to their nation. They repeat a solemn, public vow, pledging their allegiance to the government represented by the flag of the United States. Their chests swell and their eyes moisten with thoughts of the greatness of their nation—for their nation is great. Gauged by the combination of military might, distributed wealth, and human political freedom, it is unparalleled in human history.

At such moments, we Americans need to remember two things. First, greatness is not identical with goodness. Second, if America is great, we are not the ones who made it great. We can take no credit. What we have received is given to us as a gift and a stewardship. It is up to us to do the right things with it.

The inclusion of patriotic exercises as part of American worship perplexes and even annoys Christians throughout the rest of the world (beginning with our immediate neighbors to the north and the south). Some question the value of patriotism in general; others simply object to expressions of nationalism in church. In turn, Americans often find these objections puzzling and sometimes off-putting.

Should Christians be patriotic at all? If so, then should they carry their patriotism into their churches? I would like to offer tentative answers to these questions—tentative because I am an American and I share most of the American sensibilities. Therefore, my answers will hardly qualify as impartial. The questions, however, are important and should not simply be

dismissed.

My answers will reflect Baptist rather than Anabaptist assumptions. First, I shall assume that governments are an aspect of God's common grace, that they are not intrinsically sinful or demonic, and that Christians are biblically permitted to involve themselves in civil affairs. Second, I shall assume that wars are not universally and invariably unjust, that the waging of just war is one of the legitimate functions of a government, and that Christians are permitted to render military service in the cause of a just war. This essay is not the place to defend those propositions. I state them merely to be transparent about my presuppositions.

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Patriotism comes in two forms. The first is equivalent to Jingoism. It is a xenophobic form of nationalism that sees in one's own country the *summum bonum*. It advances the interests of one's nation by encroaching upon the legitimate interests of other nations. It is smug, often arrogant, and sometimes rapacious. This form of patriotism is, in effect, idolatry.

Needless to say, this form of patriotism has no place in the life of a Christian. Christians can be susceptible to it, however. They may infer God's approval from the prosperity or military success of their nation. They may identify their national interests with those of the Kingdom of God. They may even assume that the strength of their nation constitutes some form of divine authorization to interfere in the affairs of other sovereign nations. Each of these attitudes expresses a false and idolatrous patriotism.

There is another form of patriotism, however. It recognizes that each citizen receives a patrimony from the fatherland (the term is deliberate: both *patriot* and *patrimony* are related to the Greek term for *father*). With the patrimony comes (at minimum) a debt of gratitude. The recognition of this debt and appropriate expression of gratitude are akin to honoring one's parents. Appropriate expressions of gratitude include respect for the nation's symbols, concern for the nation's wellbeing, and a willingness to defend the interests of the nation insofar as that can be done justly.

Therefore, not every species of patriotism is sinful. Indeed, at least one form of patriotism is an aspect of piety. To recognize one's indebtedness to one's homeland and civilization is more than permissible. It is implied by the fifth commandment. All Christians, whether American or Zimbabwean, Argentinean or Zambian, owe this gratitude to their native lands.

Indeed, they owe this form of patriotism, not simply to their nation, but to their section and their community as well. One of the calamities of modern mobility is the erosion of the sense of section and community. Vestiges of this sense do remain, however, in the speaking of regional dialects and the honoring of regional symbols. Such practices should be encouraged, not hindered.

I have argued that patriotism is not always and unavoidably idolatrous. I have further suggested that some forms of patriotism are actually virtuous. Even with respect to those forms, however, certain cautions must be raised.

The first caution is that one's country—even one's nation—is not identical to the state. The state is the specific regime that governs a nation at a given time. In most forms of government, the nation is subject to the state. In republics and democracies, the people of the nation may participate in shaping the state. But the state is never under the direct control of the

entire nation.

Therefore, legitimate patriotism does not obligate a citizen to endorse or to defend every policy of the state. Patriots may love their countries while opposing and perhaps fearing their governments. If the state is sufficiently destructive of the nation, true patriots may even seek to topple it. For example, many Romanians who loved their nation were willing to overthrow the bloodthirsty dictator Ceausescu, given a chance. This distinction is absolutely crucial for Christian patriotism. It means that Christian patriots should be able to oppose injustices on the part of the state, even while retaining the ordinate measure of affection and loyalty for their nation.

The second caution is that even legitimate and virtuous patriotism may become idolatrous. The human heart can fabricate idols out of nearly anything, including one's country. Many tempters will try to induce patriots to elevate loyalty to nation above loyalty to God, to right, or to justice. Christians are not immune from this temptation, and Americans who envision the United States as a Christian nation may be the most susceptible of all. To worship one's country is a disservice both to God and to the nation.

A third caution is a bit more practical in nature. Love of one's country is no excuse for discourtesy. Other countries also have their own codes by which they measure politeness. We do well to learn and to abide by those codes when we travel abroad and when we entertain travelers at home. Christian grace is not compatible with rudeness. If we make mistakes (and we shall), a humble and teachable demeanor will go a long way toward smoothing ruffled feathers. Most of the world's people are eager to welcome us if we are willing to try to understand their cultures and respect their sensibilities.

America is a great nation, but it is not the only great nation. Depending upon the standard of measurement, it may not even be the greatest. We are not disloyal to America if we recognize and enjoy what is great in other countries.

Subject to limitations and defined correctly, patriotism is a virtue that Christians ought to manifest. We do owe something to our homeland, and recognition of that debt is one part of piety. To what extent, however, should we use our churches and worship services as centers for the fostering and expression of patriotic sentiment? That question will be addressed in the next essay. ✖

This essay is by [Kevin T. Bauder](#), president of Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of Central Seminary's professors, students, or alumni necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.

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