

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 Two

Patriots come in more than one variety. Some patriots honor their nation more than they honor God. That kind of patriotism is arrogant, idolatrous, and immoral. Other patriots, however, are motivated by a sense of gratitude at the patrimony they have received from their homeland. They display their gratitude in ordinate ways, remembering that every nation, like every person, is finite and flawed. Such patriotism is not only permissible; it is probably implied by the fifth commandment.

Let me identify myself as a patriot of the second sort. The citizens of the United States are constituted as a people by an idea. This idea has been established and articulated in the founding documents of their republic (the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, the Bill of Rights) and in other significant statements (the Mayflower Compact, Jefferson's letter to the Danbury Association, the Federalist Papers, the Gettysburg Address). This idea involves the rule of law, limited government, separation of powers, guarantees of important freedoms, and individual responsibility and accountability. I believe that the constitutional republic of the United States is almost as close as one can get to an ideal government of, by, and for sinful people. I love the idea and honor the symbols that represent it: the National Anthem, the Fourth of July, the flag. I wear the uniform in the auxiliary of one of the nation's armed services. And yes, I pledge allegiance to the flag.

Let me say it plainly: I love these United States. What factors should help us decide whether to honor and celebrate the United States (or any other nation) in our church services?

First, the church is not the United States. It does not exist by virtue of the authority or protection of the United States. The church neither seeks permission from nor trembles under the prohibition of any government. The church takes its orders from Christ. Its worship must be characterized by absolute, unconditioned, single-minded loyalty to Him alone. Devotion to Christ (understood in terms of faith, hope, and love) relativizes absolutely all human loyalties. Christians can never rightly pledge unconditioned allegiance to anyone or anything other than Christ Himself.

The church in this world is an outpost or colony. It exists among worldly governments, but it has no part with them. When we enter the church (i.e., when we assemble with a true congregation of Christ), we no longer occupy the ground of any worldly nation. We now inhabit a small, anticipatory outpost of the New Jerusalem.

Within the political and social arrangements of this world, Christians are aliens and wayfarers. True, in a temporal sense they do remain citizens of the nation in which they are born, but their primary and eternal citizenship is in the New Nation into which they have been born again. They are simultaneously citizens of a Heavenly Kingdom, awaiting its inauguration, and citizens of some present earthly nation. While certain duties do arise from their earthly citizenship, these must always be subordinated to and critiqued by the obligations of heavenly citizenship.

We ought to draw a distinction at this point between the role of the individual Christian and the role of the church. Individual Christians are really (though secondarily) citizens of earthly nations. They are involved in the affairs of their earthly countries, and they owe definite obligations to those countries. *Ceteris paribus*, they may rightly participate in civil affairs, vote, express political opinions, serve in the military, and hold office. The church, however, is not connected to any temporal order. It is not a political entity but a spiritual one. Its government, mission, authority, counsel, and relationships are spiritual. It has no right to address political issues, express political opinions, or endorse political candidates.

All of this suggests that displays of patriotism, while sometimes appropriate for Christian individuals in everyday life, are ill-advised for the assembled church. Nowhere does the New Testament authorize the celebration of national identity as any part of the church's mission or responsibility. The church of the New Testament transcends all earthly national identifications. The moment that we celebrate the symbols of one nation in church, we risk excluding or offending Christians of other nations and thereby become respecters of persons. Incidentally, this can also happen between different parts of the same nation, as when American churches in the North thoughtlessly sing "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," which is highly offensive to many Southerners.

Should not the United States be accorded some special privilege, however, because of its Christian heritage? If this argument was ever legitimate, it has certainly become less so in recent decades. To cite only one example, the United States has authorized more than thirty years of abortion on demand. The specter of millions of legally butchered babies haunts the United States and has become an indelible aspect of our national heritage. The penumbra of this holocaust darkens every celebration of American identity.

Does this mean that we should simply ignore patriotic occasions? I do not think so. A

moment ago, I argued that the church is a spiritual body and therefore has neither the interest nor the right to address political questions. Now I need to point out the obvious exception to this rule. Some political questions are also moral and spiritual questions. When morality overlaps with politics, part of the church's mission includes helping believers to think biblically about the area of overlap. Churches of all nations might use patriotic holidays to do this. They could use the opportunity to examine the ideas (historical or current) that shape their nation. They could ask what the Bible teaches about those ideas. They could explain the crucial distinctions and nuances that will enable the Lord's people to make wise and responsible decisions when moral obligation intersects civic life.

Therefore, one spiritual use of patriotic occasions is to instruct the Lord's people. Another use is suggested by 1 Timothy 2:1-4, in which Christians are commanded to give thanks and to pray for national leaders. None of our churches has yet exhausted this duty.

Churches do not need to ignore national holidays. They must, however, use those holidays to magnify God and edify the saints. They must act faithfully to advance the glory of Christ and fulfill the mission of the church. ✖

This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, president of Central Baptist Theological Seminary.
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Central Baptist Theological Seminary of Minneapolis | Contact Us
900 Forestview Ln N, Plymouth, MN 55441 | 1-800-827-1043 | www.centraseminary.edu