

PATRIOTISM:

A Question for our Time

Patriotic (adj.): “Having or expressing devotion to and vigorous support for one’s country”

Oxford Dictionaries



“MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN” is the campaign slogan of Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump, which has captured the hearts of many Americans.

“MAKE THE NETHERLANDS GREAT AGAIN!” was echoed by Geert Wilders, leader of the Dutch Party for Freedom, and known for his controversial anti-Islamist campaigns in the Netherlands.

“LET’S TAKE BACK CONTROL” was the pro-Brexit slogan that motivated millions to vote for an ‘independent’ United Kingdom apart from the European Union.

“DEFEND OUR COLOURS” is the slogan of Marine Le Pen, founder of the French radical-right, anti-immigration National Front Party.

“FOR HOME, FREEDOM AND GERMAN CULTURE” is used by German protesters at rallies organised by PEGIDA (Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the West), the country’s anti-immigration movement.

Donald Trump, Brexit supporters, Marine Le Pen, Geert Wilders, PEGIDA and a host of campaigners in Europe all have in common a deep sense of patriotism and a strong nationalistic devotion to their country.

In light of this growing trend, a key question is being asked – where does patriotism fit into Christianity? Can I be both a Christian and a patriot? Can I celebrate my national and cultural identity and still pursue Kingdom principles? And, as **Ryan Hamm** asks in an article in *Christianity Today*¹, “how can faithful Christians hold in tension their love for their country and their primary love and commitment to the kingdom of God?”

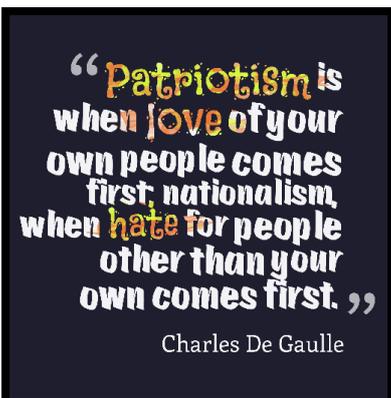
These are important questions, and relate to issues of electoral responsibility, considerations of faith, national preferences, civic accountability, cross-cultural hospitality and ultimately our Christian witness. If the more than 65 million displaced people in the world is **“the story of our time”** then this is probably **“the question of our time.”**

Firstly, we take a look at the differences between **PATRIOTISM** and **NATIONALISM**. The distinction between the two has often been blurred by zeal and by a legitimate struggle that lies at the root of most of the modern-day ‘anti-immigrant movements’.

¹ <http://www.christianitytoday.com/biblestudies/articles/churchhomeleadership/patriotism.html?start=1>

Patriotism vs. Nationalism

Hamm offers the following insight:



“PATRIOTISM can be defined simply as love of country—it’s a love that seems to include much of the world’s population. It’s the kind of love that makes you thankful you’re an American whenever you hear the “The Star-Spangled Banner”, or that makes you thankful you’re British whenever you hear “God Save the Queen,” or that unified joy of listening to Nkosi Sikele’ iAfrica as a South African. It’s that feeling of altruistic gratitude for freedom, or democracy, or culture, or any of the other values people around the world treasure in their nation.

NATIONALISM, on the other hand, takes that love of country and expands it to mean love of country *at the expense of* other nations. It’s when someone believes they are better because they come from a particular place, or that someone else is less valuable because of the country that issued their passport. [Sometimes this is gratitude for the gifts bestowed on a country’s citizens, but too often it treasures national identity at the expense of others.] It’s saying, ‘My country is better than yours, and you are less civilized/enlightened/good because of where you are from.’ There are ways to say, ‘The nation that you belong to should consider adopting some of my country’s freedoms’ without it being nationalism. But nationalism never considers what one’s nation could learn from others.



There’s a reason why Paul writes repeatedly about the need for the Jews to recognise the full participation of Gentiles in the kingdom of God. The Jews’ national and religious identity made it difficult for them to understand how a Greek, Ethiopian, or slave from Asia Minor could be just as much a part of God’s new work. But Paul’s famous assertion that there is ‘neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus’ (Galatians 3:28) demonstrates that nationalism must never be part of the new kingdom of God.”

Proud Patriotism vs. Grateful Patriotism

Christians define patriotism in different ways. Some are “**proud patriots**”, thinking that their nation is ‘number one’ (better than any other in the world) and that God has a special affinity for those who share the same nationality or culture. Others are more inclined to be “**grateful patriots**”, demonstrating a general love of one’s country, an appreciation for those who share the same values, and a love for neighbour and the shared environment.

Derek Vreeland, in an article featured in *Missio Alliance* (entitled “*It’s OK to be Patriotic, but...²*”), elaborates on this principle:

“Everything that the Creator God does in forming us humans is done in place. It follows from this that since we are His creatures and can hardly escape the conditions of our making, for us everything that has to do with God is also in place. All living is local: this land, this neighbourhood, these trees and streets and houses, this work, these people.’ (quoted from Eugene Peterson’s ‘Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places’)

To have a love and sense of pride in the place you live is a good God-given response to creation. There is a sacredness in the place where we live.

As followers of Jesus, it is OK for us to be patriotic. It is natural for us to have pride of place and love of people, but patriotism left unchecked can lead to a misplaced affection and the idolatry of nationalism.

² <http://www.missioalliance.org/ok-patriotic-2/>

According to Life Way Research³, in a recent survey of 1,000 [protestant American] pastors, 53% of pastors (more than half!) agreed that their congregation sometimes seems to love America more than God. Anytime the people of God love anything more than God, bad things happen.

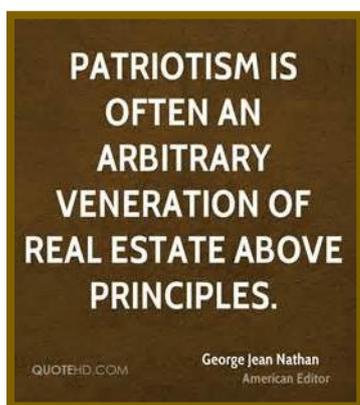


Do you recall the time when Jesus commanded us to hate our moms and dads? Jesus had grown in popularity. He had been preaching the gospel of the kingdom and healing the sick. Crowds of people began following Jesus. On one occasion he stopped to address the crowd directly saying:

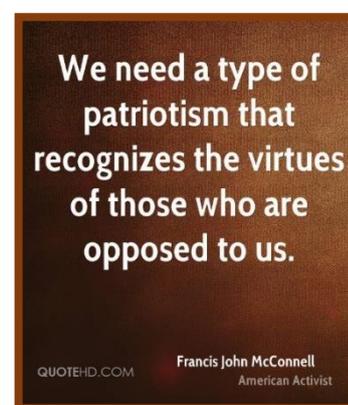
‘If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple... So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be My disciple.’ (Luke 14: 26,27,33 ESV)

Following Jesus requires a renunciation, a breaking away of all attachments, in order to follow Him. We can take this teaching and replace ‘father and mother’ with ‘country [and culture] in which you live’. In this way, we can hear Jesus say to us: ‘If anyone comes to Me and does not hate the country in which you live, you cannot be My disciple.’

Just as in the case of family, **this hate is not literal**. It just means our love for [our nation] is far below our love for Jesus. We subordinate our love for country well below our love for God.



Remember that God loves all the nations of the earth. The idolatry of nationalism begins to take root and produce its bitter fruit when we think [our nation] is somehow God’s favourite nation. Under the sway of nationalism, we give into the ugly side of patriotism where we are filled with thoughts like: ‘my country right or wrong; my country is far superior than those poor third world nations; God has blessed our nation so we can help the rest of the world figure out how to do things right.’ When we convince ourselves that our nation is at the centre of God’s activity, we lose sight that Jesus is Lord of the whole earth and the King of all nations.



Consider a few verses from Scripture:

- For God is the King of all the earth; sing praises with a psalm! God reigns over the nations; God sits on His holy throne. (Psalm 47:7-8 ESV)
- The LORD looks down from heaven; He sees all the children of man; from where He sits enthroned He looks out on all the inhabitants of the earth, He who fashions the hearts of them all and observes all their deeds. (Psalm 33:13-15 ESV)
- The king is not saved by his great army; a warrior is not delivered by his great strength. The war horse is a false hope for salvation, and by its great might it cannot rescue. (Psalm 33:16-17 ESV)

Celebrating Patriotism vs. Mourning Patriotism

Returning to the issue of patriotism as opposed to nationalism, we again refer to the article by **Ryan Hamm**, who takes a look at **what Jesus did** in order to gain a guideline.

³ <http://factsandtrends.net/2016/06/30/pastors-worry-about-patriotism-still-favor-july-4th-displays/#.V33-xf197RY>



“In Luke 19, there's a peculiar story about Jesus. In the midst of the pomp and glory of the Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem, Jesus begins to weep. He weeps because the city – and, by extension, all Israel – failed to recognise His lordship, and because He knew the impending destruction of Jerusalem. The scene echoed a previous lament over Jerusalem (Luke 13:31-35), where Jesus said, ‘How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!’ (v.34, ESV).

Jesus, it seems, loved His people, His city, His nation—so much so that He cried over it. He didn't despise His country or wish ill upon it—instead, He wanted nothing but the best for it, and it grieved Him to see how His people had rejected His teachings.

Jesus' example of patriotism perfected can provide a guidepost to Christians. It's an example that's both pragmatic and romantic, shot through with justice, truth and love. It's not a nationalistic patriotism—it's a love for nation that doesn't pit it against other nations. Instead, it's a recognition of love followed by a mournful recognition of shortcomings.

If we apply Christ's words to today, it might mean that **we celebrate the times our nation does something great**. It doesn't mean we totally deny a love or appreciation for our country, or throw up our hands feeling we can't make it better. Like it or not, we're part of whatever community into which we're born, and proper patriotism takes note of the in-born love many of us have along with a desire to make our home nations as good as they can be. Christ's words mean we embrace a healthy love for country and don't diminish the godly notion that it's okay to love the place from which you come.

But Jesus' lament also means **we mourn the times when our nation does something wrong**. It means tempering our love for country with the knowledge that there are times our countries will get it wrong. Because if you look just under the pomp of most nations, there are some pretty ugly wounds.

In other words, **true, good patriotism lies in the ability to judge one's nation in its successes *and* its shortcomings.**”

National Patriotism vs. Kingdom Patriotism

Ryan Hamm continues with the principle of “primary allegiances”.

“Perhaps the most important distinction to be made by Christians is that our first love must be the kingdom of God, over and above any love of country, no matter how pure and honourable that love might be. It's easy for Christians to begin to worship their country as an idol. In ‘The Four Loves’, C. S. Lewis puts the matter quite concisely. He notes that love of country “becomes a **demon** when it becomes a **god**”.

In short, we can too easily allow our celebration of nation to intertwine with and pervert our love of God, and in many cases, usurp our love for God. We see how humanity has twisted almost every gift of God into an idol that can sinfully replace Him. Money, sex, work, food, drink—each of these (among others) have become damaging idols for too many Christians. It wouldn't take long for any of us to think of examples of when Christians have placed love of country above love of God—and what disastrous consequences this has had.

Therefore, the Christian's primary allegiance is to God and to His church—which sometimes means the Christian patriot must disagree with one's country and do things which might be counterintuitive to ‘civic duty’.

Christian responsibility always trumps patriotism, even when it seems uncomfortable.



Jesus taught us that loving one's country is a godly thing. But Jesus also died for people of all nations—putting His own nation's interests below the needs of every person. To the people of Israel, this might have seemed lunacy—Jesus was betraying His own people by spreading His message to Gentiles. But the example stands tall to us. Jesus asks that we lay all of our loves—including our love of country—at His feet so that we may grant Him the first fruits of our love.

When Christians put love of country below love of God and love of Christian brothers and sisters, we see a glimpse of the future God has promised His Church. John's vision in Revelation includes this stunning scene:

'After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.' (Revelation 7: 9-10)

'Every nation, tribe, people and language'. It's an image of Christians crying their allegiance to God and to one another over and above any allegiance to country. It's a reminder that we can do the same, even now."

IN CONCLUSION

Here is a prayer **Derek Vreeland** wrote, using the "Prayer to the Crucified Christ" from *The Book of Common Prayer*. Why don't you pray it for your nation?

"Lord Jesus, You stretched out Your arms of love upon the hard wood of the cross that everyone in this country, and around the world, might come within the reach of Your saving embrace.

You are the Saviour of our friends and neighbours living here and throughout our nation. Remember the poor, the weak and vulnerable among us. We pray for civic leaders, teachers, first responders, and those carrying the wounds of war. Come and save them, heal them, and lead them by Your Spirit.

And so clothe us in Your Spirit that we, reaching forth our hands in love, may bring those who do not know You to the knowledge and love of You, the God and King of all nations, for the honour of Your name.

Amen."

SOURCES:

- <http://www.christianitytoday.com/biblestudies/articles/churchhomeleadership/patriotism.html?start=1>
- <http://www.missioalliance.org/ok-patriotic-2/>
- <http://factsand Trends.net/2016/06/30/pastors-worry-about-patriotism-still-favor-july-4th-displays/#.V33-xfI97RY>



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