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PATRIOTISM OR NATIONAL IDENTITY: RIGHTLY ORDERING LOVE OF COUNTRY

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The intersections of Christian faith and patriotism in America are varied and complex, but nothing provides quite as interesting a look into the intersections as attending a chapel service on a military installation. As a military “brat,” I’ve been to my fair share — I’ve lived on Air Force bases for a substantial portion of my life, I’ve been to more military ceremonies than I can count, and I’ve heard the preaching of many a chaplain on a Sunday morning. My identity as an American has been central to my life, particularly when my dad was deployed overseas to a dangerous region of the world or when my family struggled to find meaning in yet another cross-country relocation. However, my parental influences in this department were somewhat mixed — while my dad’s service greatly impacted our daily lives, my mom was a missionary kid, and both of her sisters moved overseas to become missionaries with their families. As a kid (and even now), I have found that the combination of these influences has produced some tension. One side of my family finds very little of their identity in their home country, while another side takes great pride in it.

Earthly Allegiances and Heavenly Citizenship. For Christians, this tension is a well-known one. Many Christian traditions in America practice a faith laced with patriotism and defined by “American values,”¹ while many others find their greatest identity in shared traditions of churches on the other side of the world. Many American Christians struggle with discerning how their patriotism should operate when followers of Christ are called to work for the advancement of a kingdom greater than any earthly nation. Is America such a “Christian nation” that our loyalty to our God and our country are

fundamentally compatible? Or are we to disavow all earthly allegiances (including nationality) in favor of a different kind of citizenship altogether?

A chaplain at a recent chapel I attended said this in prayer: “Lord, we know that our service to our country and our service to you do not contradict or conflict.” While it was a well-intentioned nod to that day’s observance of Memorial Day, the statement struck me as dangerous. I have, no doubt, offered some form of “service” to my nation throughout the course of my life — I have moved across the country multiple times (including once before my senior year of high school), and I have endured the absence of my father for varying periods of time during those particularly rocky teenage years. I haven’t served my country anywhere near to the extent that my father has, but even I can say truthfully that there have been instances where my service to country and my service to God produced some tension. It might be easier to think of examples when my father’s two services might force a choice between loyalties, but even civilians will face circumstances that require such a choice. Our nation will ask for support for values our God condemns, our civic institutions will ask for an allegiance that trumps all others, and our desire to protect and provide for our fellow citizens will come into conflict with our desire to care for the global church.

When Loyalties Compete. These tensions — these instances in which loyalties rub up against each other and allegiances fight for dominance — are powerful reminders that placing our “services” in hierarchical order remains important. In *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*, James K. A. Smith powerfully articulates the ways that nationalistic liturgies teach citizens to prioritize their allegiance to country above all else. Activities such as saying the Pledge of Allegiance in schoolrooms daily, singing the national anthem before important cultural events like athletic competitions, and consuming patriotic (and often militaristic) films and TV shows all teach powerful and physical lessons about the supremacy of national loyalty.² None of these “rituals” is inherently negative, but their pervasiveness and repetition can work together in powerful ways to communicate and inscribe certain values. Smith explains that these “material tactile rituals are formative precisely because they are material — because they get hold of our passions through the body, seeping into our imaginary.”³ These rituals use powerful means to teach citizens values and ideas that shape them, which is why prioritizing our loyalties and thinking critically about the way they affect us (in sometimes contradictory ways) is important.

This election season, many of these potential conflicts have been illuminated. The ongoing debate about the current refugee crisis in Syria and elsewhere has many Christians asking, Does my loyalty to the global church outweigh my desire to protect my fellow citizens? Political disagreements about foreign military interventions ask

Christians to “pick sides.” Debates about immigration rely on fundamental understandings of national loyalty and identity. Donald Trump’s recent picks for his “evangelical advisory board” highlight some of these tensions — one of the members formerly led a church called “Without Walls International,”⁴ while one of his major policy proposals is a giant wall spanning the United States–Mexican border. None of these questions — the refugee crisis, foreign military intervention, or illegal immigration — are simple problems with easy answers for anyone. Christians especially have to examine them critically, often balancing loyalties that may seem to conflict.

Even the slightest of potential conflicts is cause for ensuring that values are placed in an appropriate hierarchy. An earthly nation and a heavenly kingdom will not always share the same goals. The Christian’s loyalty to country may require that the protection of citizens be prioritized above the well-being of refugees, for example, while loyalty to the global church may require welcoming refugees into countries, towns, and homes. In a world of constant international conflict, increasingly we will be asked to prioritize military superiority, cultural dominance, and national identity. In other words, we will be asked to make our country our first love.

Loving Country and God in the Right Order. C. S. Lewis famously said, “In so far as I learn to love my earthly dearest at the expense of God and instead of God, I shall be moving towards the state in which I shall not love my earthly dearest at all. When first things are put first, second things are not suppressed but increased.”⁵ Lewis so eloquently explained a foundational truth of the gospel: loving things *rightly* means loving them in the right order. Prioritizing national loyalty above loyalty to God means our country is not loved *rightly*, and both love of God and country will suffer. Unbridled patriotism can give rise to militarism and ethnocentrism when it is not subordinate to a greater love of God and His people. Without that subordination, there is nothing restraining violent conquest or ethnic discrimination,⁶ because protecting and sustaining one’s country becomes the ultimate goal. The values of an individual are shaped differently when love of country is prioritized above love of God — instead of valuing compassion and selflessness, the more prominent values become competition and success. To borrow the language of Augustine, our loves will be *disordered*,⁷ neither one receiving love the way in which it was intended.

Rightly ordering our loves allows for patriotism and love of country, but it prevents nationalism and idolization of country. These loves and loyalties become sinful only when they become disordered — prioritized or valued more highly than they deserve. A disordered love requires putting on some blinders: loving any imperfect earthly thing as we were meant to love a perfect God necessitates ignoring its

sins and failures. In America, this disordered love has caused many Christians to justify any of their nation's actions, under the assumption that Paul's command in Romans 13:1 to "be subject to the governing authorities" (ESV) means that Christians be constantly obedient citizens.⁸ Disordered love will always result in idolatry — placing what was never meant to be worshiped in a place of uncritical praise.

Rightly ordering our loves doesn't require abandonment of other loves, but it does require proper prioritization. A country rightly loved will result in better civic engagement; instead of ethnocentrism or discrimination, Christians can fight for just policies domestically and internationally. Instead of ultimate loyalty to certain leaders or political ideologies, Christians can pray for guidance from a higher ruler. Instead of letting fear drive reactionary policies, Christians can find security in an omnipotent God and advocate for policies with the wisdom only He can provide. When Christians love their God and their country rightly, they can be far better citizens of both earthly nations and the kingdom of heaven.

I will continue to find myself in many chapel pews — a place of military and religious significance. They're places of odd intersection, yet their very existence speaks volumes about the humans that use them; even in a place that signifies military strength and national identity, there remains a felt need for something greater and more powerful. Sitting in a chapel pew always will be an exercise in ordering loves: recognizing the supremacy of the kingdom of God, while loving the broken and messy nation over which He is sovereign. — *Kaitlyn Schiess*

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NOTES

- 1 See this piece from Western Seminary's blog: Chad Hall, "American Values Are Not Necessarily Christian Values," *Transformed: Living the Gospel in an Everyday World*, January 28, 2015, <https://www.westernseminary.edu/transformedblog/2015/01/28/american-values-are-not-necessarily-christian-values/>.
- 2 James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 106.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 104.
- 4 Florida "preacher and televangelist" Paula White is a member of Trump's board. See Kate Shellnutt and Sarah Eekhoff Zylstra, "Who's Who of Trump's 'Tremendous' Faith Advisers," *Christianity Today*, June 22, 2016, www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2016/juneweb-only/whos-who-of-trumps-

tremendous-faith-advisors.html.

- 5 C. S. Lewis, *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis*, Volume 3: Narnia, Cambridge, and Joy, 1950–1963 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 1952.
- 6 The Southern Baptist Convention Ethics and Religious Liberty Convention offered this subordination as an important step in seeking racial reconciliation in churches and society at large in this piece: Ethics and Religious Liberty Convention, “Rejecting Separate but Equal Again,” *ERLC*, December 5, 2014, <http://erlc.com/resource-library/articles/rejecting-separate-but-equal-again>.
- 7 St. Augustine, and John K. Ryan, *The Confessions of St. Augustine* (New York: Image Books, 1960), 2.2.
- 8 See Brandon O’Brien, “Is Patriotism Christian,” *Christianity Today*, June 28, 2011, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/biblestudies/articles/spiritualformation/patriotismchristian.html>.