

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
June 30, 2024

Kingdom Patriots

Philippians 3:17-4:1

Patriotism ran high in Philippi. Everywhere you looked, there were reminders that you're part of the Roman empire, which included the imperial cult, that is, worship and veneration of the Caesars and their family members. Day in and day out, you were surrounded with Roman imperial ideology. It was imprinted on coins, displayed via statues, announced at athletic events, showcased in parades, inscribed on monuments, and exhibited in pictures. Loyalty to Rome and its leaders was paramount.

This devotion to the empire had a long history. The Romans had conquered Philippi in 168 BC, claiming it and its environs as a Roman province. In 42 BC the emperor Octavian refounded the city as a Roman military colony. He astutely populated Philippi and its surrounding agricultural area with discharged veterans from his wars, helping to ensure a loyal citizenry. He did something similar in 30 BC when he granted land and citizenship to war veterans who had actually fought on the opposing side in his battle with Antony.

Philippi's history meant that most of its people were proud to be Roman citizens. They enjoyed considerable property and legal rights. They were exempt from taxes. They lived under the rule of Roman law. For them, living in Philippi was like living in the mother city of Rome, only in a different part of the empire. In Philippi, there were Roman arches, bathhouses, forums, and temples. Latin was the official language. But with all this came the social pressure and expectation that you would participate in the worship of the emperor. Though it wasn't legally mandatory, not doing so would come across as disloyal and subversive. You didn't want to be perceived as unpatriotic.

This is the social and political atmosphere where Paul has been cultivating and forming a community of people who confess Jesus Christ as Lord, the ruler of the world. It's not as if the patriotic citizens of Philippi are unaccustomed to new ideas and belief systems arriving in town. Their city's location on a Roman road linking the western and eastern parts of the empire meant they were used to the daily traffic of commerce and culture, including new religions. So when Paul and his companions first arrived with their gospel about Jesus, it may not have created a great stir.

However, according to the book of Acts (chapter 16), after Paul and his coworkers made an inconspicuous start at a riverside place of prayer, where Lydia and some others responded with faith, disruptions and difficulties mounted. Paul and Silas eventually encounter hostility to their identity as Jews, and are even accused of civil disobedience. Some of Philippi's residents accuse them of "advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice" (16:21). Put this evidence in the mix with other references Paul makes in Philippians to Roman identity and culture, and we get a sense of how the gospel collides with other versions of who actually governs the world, at every level.

How we're governed, and who gets to do the governing, come to the fore as we head into this week and celebrate Independence Day. That's literally the case when you see the

American flag and the Christian flag placed in more prominent and visible positions for today's service. We even included the pledge to each flag as part of the opening portion of our worship. Some may be less familiar with the history of the Christian flag, which dates back to an impromptu speech given by Charles C. Overton, a Sunday School superintendent in New York, on September 26, 1897. When the guest speaker for the Sunday School kick-off didn't show up, Overton decided to wing it by talking about flags and their symbolism, after spotting an American flag near the podium. He proposed that Christians should have their own flag. The idea stayed on his mind long after the speech, and in 1907 Overton teamed up with Ralph Diffendorfer to produce and promote the flag. As for the colors, white represents purity and peace, blue represents fidelity, and red represents Christ's blood sacrifice. As for the pledge, the first version, written more broadly, reads: "I pledge allegiance to the Christian flag, and to the Savior for whose kingdom it stands; one brotherhood, uniting all mankind, in service and love." The version we used earlier substitutes "Christians" for "mankind." Another version reads: "I pledge allegiance to the Christian flag, and to the Savior for whose kingdom it stands; one Savior, crucified, risen, and coming again with life and liberty to all who believe."¹

No matter which version of the pledge people prefer, the very presence of the Christian flag, and its accompanying symbolism, remind us that the American flag, and the national pride it signifies, are always part of a larger territory of loyalty that we Christians inhabit. That territory is called the kingdom of God, the reign of our crucified and risen Lord. This doesn't mean that being proud of our nation is therefore excluded from the Christian life. Followers of Jesus can be rightfully patriotic. Symbols like the flag, and the ideals of liberty, self-government, and individual rights, are worthy of the attention we give them on July 4. There's a place in the life of the church for love of country, but not in a way that identifies our nation with the eternal reign of the Lord. As Russell Moore has put it, "We can, those of us who are Americans, love America—with all its flaws and failures—precisely because we don't expect it to be the kingdom of God."²

On their way to have church, the believers in Philippi passed by all sorts of shrines and temples dedicated to the adoration of various deities. They glanced at the statues and public inscriptions announcing the power and might of Rome. They were surrounded by local and national offers of hope and promises of lasting peace. But then, in the course of their worship, as they listened to someone reading Paul's letter aloud to the congregation, they heard the apostle saying, "But our citizenship is in heaven" (3:20). Paul uses a term that refers to the commonwealth or state to which someone belongs. He reminds them that though there are many people, including some in their own congregation, whose lives are shaped primarily by the pressures of the surrounding culture, they themselves belong to a different state. They may be living in a colony of Rome, but the deepest reality is that they're actually a colony of God's kingdom. Though the emperor, identified by many as a "savior," is in the empire's capital city, their actual governing authority is in heaven. That's the commonwealth from which their Savior will arrive to govern the whole creation. For now, says Paul, your calling is to live the life of the future, the life of God's reign, while you're here under this government.

One person tells about a tradition that George Shultz had when he served as Secretary of State during the Reagan Administration:

... Shultz kept a large globe in his office. When newly appointed ambassadors had an interview with him and when ambassadors returning from their posts for their first visit with him were leaving his office, Shultz would test them. He would say, "You have to go over to the globe and prove to me that you can identify your country." They would go over, spin the globe, and put their finger on the country to which sent—unerringly.

When Shultz's old friend and former Senate majority leader Mike Mansfield was appointed ambassador to Japan, even he was put to the test. This time, however, Ambassador Mansfield spun the globe and put his hand on the United States. He said: "That's my country."

On June 27, 1993, Shultz related this to Brian Lamb on C-Span's "Booknotes." Said the secretary: "I've told that story, subsequently, to all the ambassadors going out: 'Never forget you're over there in that country, but your country is the United States. You're there to represent us. Take care of our interests and never forget it, and you're representing the best country in the world.'"³

I hear Paul telling the Christians in Philippi, "Yes, you're there in that country, but remember that heaven is your country. You're there to represent heaven. So take care of heaven's interests, and represent it well."

As we represent heaven here in our country, we do so with gratitude for the blessings, benefits, and opportunities that come with being residents in the "land of the free and the home of the brave." There are many good and great things about our nation and its presence in the larger world, things for which many people have made enormous sacrifices, to the point of giving their own lives. True, right now our divisions are deep, trust in our institutions is declining, and cynicism about those in power is rising. But living in a representative democracy still gives us significant rights and important room to have a say in shaping our society in the direction of peace and justice. So Independence Day is a valuable opportunity to give thanks and to renew our devotion to faithful citizenship in this part of God's world. It's an occasion to remember that we're not just here on this planet; We're here in this territory, in this place, in this particular country, at this time, in order to be a witness for a kingdom that's timeless. That's a great and God-given responsibility.

Near the end of episode 1 in the PBS series *Civilizations*, viewers are taken to the Mayan city of Calakmul in Mexico. This city was once one of the most influential metropolitan areas in a vast empire known as the Kingdom of the Snake. Entombed beneath a canopy of trees are the remains of more than 6,500 buildings. The tallest one is a temple, a massive ziggurat whose steps climb to the height of a 15-story building. There at the foot of the ziggurat, which has been abandoned for more than 1,000 years, an archaeologist explains the cultural rationale for such ornate, expansive building:

Ultimately, all civilizations want exactly what they can't have; the conquest of time. So they build bigger, and higher, and grander, as if they could build their way out of mortality. It never works. There always comes a moment when the most populous of cities with their markets and temples and palaces and funeral tombs are simply abandoned. And that most indefatigable leveler of all, mother nature, closes in, covering the place with desert sand or strangling it with vegetation. And then civilization dies the death of deaths, invisibility.⁴

One person has commented on this description, saying, "All nations come to an end. But there is a government which will stand the test of time. Isaiah writes, 'Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end.... The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this' (Isa. 9:7)."

Paul wrote a letter to a community of heaven's citizens, living in an empire that wouldn't last forever. And while we're grateful to live in this nation, to celebrate its blessings of liberty, and to exercise our freedom, we do so knowing that this land that we love isn't eternal. Only God and his reign are forever. If we look to America to be the kingdom of God or to usher in the reign of God, we make our country into an idol, as if it can overcome all evil and establish an unending dominion of justice and peace. That kind of power

belongs only to God, the God of resurrection. That's why Paul tells citizens of heaven, then and now: "We eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body" (vv. 20b-21). That's what God's eternal, unlimited sovereignty over all things will look like. Life in the new creation, where "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever" (Rev. 11:15).

For now, in this time between the inauguration of God's reign in Christ and its full implementation when Christ comes again, we're called to stand firm. And that includes loving our country, not just on a large scale but also and especially in ways that are close to home. One of the best ways to love your country is to love your neighbor, by loving your community, loving your family, and loving your congregation. Here in the community of believers is where you grow into your primary allegiance as a citizen of heaven. Here is where you study, train in, and practice kingdom patriotism. Here is where you get shaped more into the pattern of Christ, renouncing the pursuit of power, status, privilege, and present glory, for the sake of a truly lasting and eternal glory. I like the way that one writer has captured it when she says, "... our observation of July 4, like our general practice of patriotism, should be characteristically Christian above all else. Our concern is not imitating Jefferson or Washington, but Jesus."⁵

¹ Elesha Coffman, "Do You Know the History of the Christian Flag?" Christianity Today. August 8, 2008. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/2008/august/do-you-know-history-of-christian-flag.html> (June 26, 2024.).

² Russell Moore, "American Christians and the Anti-American Temptation." Christianity Today. November 17, 2023. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2023/november-web-only/american-christians-russell-moore-patriotism-god-country.html> (June 26, 2023).

³ Wallace Alcorn. From the files of *Leadership*.

⁴ Kenneth Clark, "Civilizations: The Second Moment of Creation," Part 1, PBS.org (April 17, 2018).

⁵ Bonnie Kristian, "How to Have Patriotism Without Nationalism." Christianity Today. June 21, 2021. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2021/july-august/how-to-have-patriotism-without-nationalism.html> (June 27, 2024).