

Patriotism and the Church

INTRODUCTION

Patriotism is on the decline in the US according to the latest Gallup poll¹. The 38% of U.S. adults who say they are "extremely proud" to be an American is the lowest in Gallup's trend, which began in 2001. Still, together with the 27% who are "very proud," 65% of U.S. adults express pride in the nation. What is patriotism, is it Biblical and how are Christians to identify with one's own Country? Is not showing honor to one's country sinful? Is it idolatrous to sing patriotic songs at church?

1. How do we define "patriotism"

There are many different connotations for patriotism today (usually politically motivated). I'd like to offer this definition (from Adam Wyatt's *Biblical Patriotism*²), **Patriotism – a loyalty to one's country that involves personal identification to such a country, culture, and people.** (More following...)

What patriotism isn't – defining the path of patriotism by outlining the ditches on either side:

- i. **Nationalism** – Insistence of one's own nation and support for its interests, especially to the exclusion or detriment of the interests of other nations. *This belief typically can be seen as a hyper sense of patriotism. (ex: Putin)*
- ii. **Cosmopolitanism** – Belief that humans are citizens of the world and should not hold any particular loyalty to a country. *This claim is on the other side of the spectrum with too little patriotism. (ex: World Economic Forum).*

2. Patriotism and the current cultural climate

Several secular studies have concluded that national pride significantly predicts well-being³. On the flip side, loss of national identity can lead to lawlessness.

a. Where have all the progressive patriots gone?

While patriotic sentiment is still a majority belief amongst adults in general, it is not so for the younger and more progressive leaning populace. A 2020 report indicates that only 34% of progressive activists are proud to be an American⁴. Additionally data gathered by Hidden Tribes suggests that progressive activists are almost 3 times more likely to be "ashamed to be an American" (69%)⁵.

b. Nationalistic groups are on the rise.

Even while patriotic sentiment is at the lowest levels since Gallup has been polling, nationalistic groups like the Proud Boys are surging. Active Proud Boys chapters jumped to 72 in 2021, up from 43 in 2020⁶.

¹ <https://news.gallup.com/poll/394202/record-low-extremely-proud-american.aspx>

² <https://www.amazon.com/Biblical-Patriotism-Evangelical-Alternative-Nationalism-ebook/dp/B09LRM4M17>

³ <https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2021/07/patriotism-nationalism-happiness/619325/>

⁴ https://www.moreincommon.com/media/s5jhgpx5/moreincommon_americanfabricreport.pdf

⁵ <https://hiddentribes.us/profiles/progressive-activists/>

⁶ <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/number-of-hate-groups-declined-in-2021-but-proud-boys-chapters-surging-says-splc>

3. Nations in the Bible

To fully understand the topic of Patriotism in the Bible we must understand what God thinks about the nations of the earth, recognize Israel's covenant relationship with God, and seek the utility of national authority from scripture.

a. God appoints nations.

From Deuteronomy 32:8 ***"When the Most High gave to the nations their inheritance, when he divided mankind, he fixed the borders of the peoples..."*** and Acts 17:26 ***"And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place..."*** we can conclude that God has established the boundaries of all countries and has appointed their time in history. In Job 12:23 ***"He makes nations great, and he destroys them; he enlarges nations, and leads them away."*** we can see the hand of God even in their destruction.

b. God has a special relationship with Israel, the nation.

In Genesis 12 God chose the family of Abraham as his covenant people ***'Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."***

c. God's utility for a national governance - Justice and Protection.

In Jeremiah 12:12 God ordered the royal house of Judah to ***"Execute justice in the morning, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor him who has been robbed,"*** and in Romans 13:3-4 ***"For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good..."*** Paul speaks of the function of the government providing Justice.

4. Patriotism in the Bible

Since the term patriot isn't directly found in the Bible, we must use the definition (a ***loyalty to one's country that involves personal identification to such a country, culture and people***) to decipher patriotism's relevance from a biblical context.

a. National identity as default (country)

It should be a foregone conclusion that 'loyalty to nation' was considered noble for the children of Israel as David charged himself in Psalms 137:5-6 ***"If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget its skill! Let my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy!"*** It isn't hard to find the definition of patriotism being equated with virtuous behavior in the Old Testament. However, God desired Israel to always make space for other nationalities (Isaiah 56:7 ***"Their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on My altar, for My house will be called a house of prayer for all the nations."***)

b. Jesus and Nationalities (people)

- i. **An Israeli Jesus**
In Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite woman⁷ He prioritized His ministry with the nation of Israel, even comparing her nationality to a family pet. Yet, it was her resilience and faith that ultimately moved Jesus to act on her behalf regardless of legitimate ministry priorities afforded by nationality. I believe this speaks both to the heart of God for all nationalities as well as God's faithfulness to the house of Israel.
 - ii. **Jesus' violent rebuke of Nationalism**
A scathing rebuke of nationalism can be seen in Mark 11. Here we understand that the Jews were setting up tables for conducting business in the court of the Gentiles. Herod's temple was divided into sections, and the Gentiles could only enter into their designated section under penalty of death. The court of the Gentiles was literally the only place a foreigner could worship. By conducting the "unclean" and "vulgar" practices inside the court of the Gentiles, the Jews could keep their section clean. It is with holy outrage that Jesus physically rebuked the moneychangers and reminded the Jewish people that 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'.
- c. **Paul and Citizenship (culture)**
- i. **A Christian's citizenship ultimately belongs to heaven**
In Philippians 3:20 *"But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ"*, we read that Paul is challenging the Philippians to focus on "what lies ahead". Additionally, the Greek word for "citizenship" that is used here is the only reference in the New Testament writings. It is possible that Paul is making a reference to the Phillipians' acknowledgement of their Roman citizenship and challenging them to a greater loyalty.
 - ii. **Paul's appeal to Roman citizenship**
Paul's citizenship to Rome and its usefulness as protection is found in Acts chapters 16 and 22. This gives clear evidence that a Christian does not necessarily need to reject the entire notion of citizenship in a nation or empire, but can claim earthly citizenship while using it for protection, reinforcing God's utility for nations.

5. Embracing Biblical Patriotism

- a. **Honoring God and Government**
Seeking to trap Jesus, the Pharisees and Herodians in Mark 12 used a false dichotomy (serving State or Serving God) in hopes to pit Jesus against the people/authorities. Jesus wisely navigated the trap and through his response indicated that serving the State and God are not diametrically opposed: *"Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."*
- b. **Recognize Institutional Authority**
1 Peter 2:13-16 *"Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution,*

⁷ Matthew 15:21-28

whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God."

c. **Righteousness as Civic Duty**

Just as we are to pay taxes and honor our leaders, we must do our part to see righteousness flourish in our land: Proverbs 14:34 **"Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people"**. What can we do to spread righteousness in our land? 1 Timothy 2:1-2 **"First of all, then, I urge that petitions, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgiving be offered for everyone— for kings and all those in authority—so that we may lead tranquil and quiet lives in all godliness and dignity."** It starts with prayer but may lead to other forms of involvement in our civic institutions as God leads.

Summary

Is being a Patriot and a Christian mutually exclusive? The short answer is No, but we need God's guidance so we can steer clear of the ditches on either side of the issue of patriotism (nationalism and cosmopolitanism). However, nothing can come before our obedience to Him, even our national identity⁸.

The longing to belong to a land can be traced back as early as the creation story. Since Adam and Eve were kicked out of the garden, we've been looking for a place to belong... One's homeland can be a type of Promised Land, a place to derive identity. However, our true fulfillment only comes when we are reunited with our Creator and live with Him forever.

The tension is for Christians to live in the world as "sojourners and exiles"⁹ but also as shaping our world being "sent...into the world"¹⁰. We identify with our homeland and commit to patriotic duty as long as that duty aligns with God's definition and purposes for our nation. May God bless America, but more importantly, may America bless God!

⁸ Philippians 3:7

⁹ 1 Peter 2:11

¹⁰ John 17:18