

Church and State

Introduction

One of the sections in our hymnbook is entitled “God and Country” and there are many good and conservative churches that sing patriotic songs in their worship services around July 4th. Of course, this year the fourth of July fell directly on a Sunday. If ever it was appropriate to sing Christian patriotic songs on Sunday, last Sunday would have been the day. So why didn’t we? This could certainly have the appearance of being very unpatriotic. And shouldn’t Christians be patriotic – especially in America? Most importantly, by not celebrating July 4th with hymns of God and country, we could give the appearance that we are not grateful to God for our national heritage. As a nation that was founded on the principles of a Judeo-Christian ethic, shouldn’t the church be the very first to celebrate the fourth of July? I do not at all believe that these are idle or useless questions.

John Quincy Adams (the sixth president of the United States) said this: “The birthday of the nation is *indissolubly linked* with the birthday of the Savior. It forms a *leading event* in the progress of the Gospel dispensation.” What did John Quincy Adams mean by this? *How* is the birthday of *America* “indissolubly linked” with the birthday of *Jesus*? In what sense does the birthday of *America* form a “leading event” in the progress of the *kingdom*? We can get a little bit of a clue as to what Mr. Adams meant when he goes on to say: “The Declaration of Independence . . . laid the cornerstone of human government upon the first precepts of Christianity.” In other words, America was founded upon the principles of a Judeo-Christian ethic. But what does *this* mean? Does this mean in some sense that America began as a “Christian nation”?

I. What is the Gospel?

Julia Ward Howe was a Unitarian and a Universalist. As a Unitarian, she rejected the doctrine of the Trinity. As a Universalist, she believed that all people of all religions will go to heaven. But Julia Ward Howe was a “*Christian*” Universalist and Unitarian. She once said in a speech: “I want to take the word Christianity back to Christ himself, back to that mighty heart whose pulse seems to throb through the world to-day, that endless fountain of charity out of which I believe has' come all true progress and all civilization that deserves the name. I go back to that great Spirit which contemplated a sacrifice for the whole of humanity. That sacrifice is not one of exclusion, but of an infinite and endless and joyous *inclusion*. And I thank God for it.”

Because Julia believed that people of all religions would go to heaven, she was not concerned with the true Gospel or with seeking the conversion of unbelievers. For Julia, the Gospel was the good news of social and political liberation. So while she rejected proselytizing, she was heavily involved in promoting such worthy causes as women’s rights, prison and education reform, and especially the abolition of slavery. It was because Julia believed in a social/political Gospel only and rejected the true Gospel of Jesus Christ that she could compose the now very famous hymn: “Battle Hymn of the Republic.” She wrote the words as a battle song for the Union Soldiers during the Civil War. Here are the original lyrics:

Battle Hymn of the Republic (original text)

Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.
He is trampling out the wine press, where the grapes of wrath are stored,
He hath loosed the fateful lightnings of his terrible swift sword,
His truth is marching on.

I have seen him in the watchfires of an hundred circling camps [Union army camps];
They have builded him an altar [“Holy War”] in the evening dews and damps,
I can read His righteous sentence by the dim and flaring lamps,
His day is marching on.

I have read *a burning Gospel writ in fiery rows of steel* [bayonets?],
As ye deal with my contemners [those who despise Me], so with you my grace shall deal,
Let the hero born of woman, crush the serpent with his heel,
Our God is marching on.

He has sounded out the trumpet that shall never call retreat,
He has waked the earth's dull sorrow with a high ecstatic beat,
Oh! be swift my soul to answer him, be jubilant my feet!
Our God is marching on.

In the whiteness of the lilies he was born across the sea,
With a glory in his bosom that shines out on you and me,
As he died to make men holy, let us die [in battle] to make men free [political and social liberation / slavery],
Our God is marching on.

He is coming like the glory of the morning on the wave,
He is wisdom to the mighty, he is succour to the brave,
So the world shall be his footstool, and the soul of Time his slave,
Our God is marching on.

The triumph of the “Gospel” is here directly connected with the triumph of the Union soldiers. In the Battle Hymn of the Republic, the Union military becomes the army of God. Now as Christians, we believe that God is sovereign in all wars and we also believe that some wars are more just than others. But, of course, we do not believe that any army since the beginning of the church has the right to march into battle singing a song like “Battle Hymn of the Republic.” Neither do we believe that the Gospel spreads through the advancement of political and social causes – no matter how worthy they are. This is why *instead* of commanding the abolition of slavery in the church (which is what we might have expected), Paul simply commanded Christian slaves and slave-owners to treat each other in light of the Gospel (Eph. 6:5-9; Col. 4:1). The institution of slavery was not the real problem. Nevertheless, Paul knew that as the true Gospel took root, the institution of slavery would go away. Paul knew that the true Gospel of the Kingdom would spread not by muskets, and canons, and bayonets, but rather by the peaceful means of changed hearts (Zech. 9:9-10 and the parables of the Mustard Seed and the Leaven –

Mat. 13:31-33). I am not saying that the Civil War was unjustified. I'm saying that in its original context, the "Battle Hymn of the Republic" was unjustified.

So then what about today? Can the Church today sing a song originally composed as a battle song for Union soldiers? In fact, I would suggest that it is *only* the church that is truly justified in singing this song. We certainly don't need to sing this song from a Unitarian or Universalist perspective! It's only natural for us to interpret figuratively the "watch-fires of a hundred circling camps." And the rest of the song has been revised and edited in our hymnal to fit with the true Gospel. There is no more "burning Gospel writ in fiery rows of steel", and instead of *dying* to make men free, we now *live* to make men free. But now that we have so thoroughly changed the original meaning of the song, can we still say that it is appropriate to sing this song (or any other Church anthem) in connection with America's Independence Day? Even today, the name of the song in our hymnal is not "Battle Hymn of the Church", but "Battle Hymn *of the Republic*." So which is it? A battle hymn of the *Church* or a battle Hymn of the *Republic*? Or are the Church and the Republic in *some* sense the same – or are they even just intimately connected?

II. Who are the People of God?

The questions we have just been asking lead us to look at two more songs in our hymnbook (both based off of 2 Chronicles 7:14 – "If My People Will Pray" and "If My People's Hearts Are Humbled"). I believe it is perfectly acceptable for the Church to sing these songs. The question we need to ask is why they are placed in the "God and Country" section.

2 Chronicles 7:14 contains God's response to the prayer of Solomon (2 Chron. 6) at the dedication of the temple. Solomon prayed that whenever Israel was facing God's discipline/judgment for sin... if Israel prayed toward the temple, acknowledging God's name and turning from their sin, then God would "hear in heaven and forgive the sin of [*His*] servants, [*His*] people Israel (2 Chron. 6:26-27, etc.). In response to this prayer:

- ✓ 2 Chronicles 7:12-16 – The LORD appeared to Solomon in the night and said to him: "I have heard your prayer and have chosen this place [temple] for myself as a house of sacrifice. When I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or command the locust to devour the land, or send pestilence among my people, if ***my people who are called by my name*** humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land. Now my eyes will be open and my ears attentive to the prayer that is made in this place. For now ***I have chosen and consecrated this house that my name may be there*** forever. My eyes and my heart will be there for all time."

The first thing we see is that God's promise to Solomon in 2 Chronicles 7:14 was completely bound up with His presence in the temple in the midst of Israel. Of course, America has never had any "true" temple – any more than China, France, or Iran. The language of "temple" is now biblically appropriate *only* for the church (1 Cor. 3:16-17; 2 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 2:19-22; 1 Pet. 2:5). And this leads us to the second point. God's says that the promise of 2 Chronicles 7:14 is specifically for "my people", and God's people are then identified specifically as those who are "called by My name." Of course, to be an American has nothing at all to do with being called by

God's name. In the OT, "my people who are called by my name" originally applied only to the **Israelite theocracy** (far from a democratic republic). And now in the New Testament "my people who are called by my name" applies *only* to the spiritual "Israel of God" in the church (Gal. 6:16; Eph. 2:11-19; 2 Cor. 6:16-7:1). I think we would all agree that under no circumstances should America ever be referred to as God's people. And yet in one of the songs in the "God and Country" section of our hymnal we find this line: "If My people's hearts are humbled, I will set their nation free." Either we are assuming that the faithfulness of the church will guarantee the political independence and prosperity of America, or we are simply confusing the Church with America altogether.

Psalm 33:12 says: "Blessed is the nation whose God is Yahweh." But we must acknowledge that in a very real sense, America's God has never been Yahweh. Psalm 33:12 says in full: "Blessed is the nation whose God is Yahweh, *the people whom He has chosen for His own inheritance.*" The Psalmist was referring very specifically and very exclusively to *Israel*. And now these words can be applied *only* to the Church as the true Israel of God. We know that God has not chosen America (or any other secular "state") for His own inheritance. Therefore, it is only the *church* that can qualify as the nation whose God is Yahweh. We (in the church) are a "chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession" (1 Pet. 2:9). Peter goes on to say in verse ten: "Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people." These things may seem like mere technicalities, but in fact, they are fundamental and basic. The fact that many Christians *do* apply these songs (and verses like 2 Chronicles 7:14 and Psalm 33:12) to America has only produced great confusion among Christians about our proper role as American citizens. (Example: Demanding that Americans say Merry Christmas versus Happy Holidays)

III. Citizens of what Country?

After looking at songs like "If My People Will Pray" and "If My People's Hearts Are Humbled" and examining them in light of the Scriptures, we have seen that biblically we must maintain a sharp and fundamental distinction between America and the Church. Therefore, I would also suggest that the "Battle Hymn of the *Church*" is not appropriately sung in connection with the birth of *America* – which leads us then to the more "innocent" songs of "God and Country" in our hymnal. Is it appropriate for us to sing songs like "America, the Beautiful", "The Star-Spangled Banner", or "My Country, 'Tis of Thee" in Church? It is certainly a wonderful thing for our hearts to thrill in American patriotism. In the same way, I'm sure it's a wonderful thing for Chinese Christians when their hearts thrill with Chinese patriotism. But what place does this kind of patriotic thrill have in the worship services of the Church?

As Christians we know that America is not our home. America is ultimately a manifestation of the *world* through which we are passing (Hebrews 11:13-16).

- ✓ Leviticus 25:23 – The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine. For you are strangers and sojourners with me.
- ✓ 1 Chronicles 29:15 – For we are strangers before you and sojourners, as all our fathers were. Our days on the earth are like a shadow, and there is no abiding.

- ✓ Psalm 39:12-13 – Hear my prayer, O LORD, and give ear to my cry; hold not your peace at my tears! For I am a sojourner with you, a guest, like all my fathers. Look away from me, that I may smile again, before I depart and am no more!
- ✓ 1 Peter 1:17 – And if you call on him as Father who judges impartially according to each one's deeds, conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile.
- ✓ 1 Peter 2:11 – Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul.

I am so grateful to be a citizen of a "state" that was built upon the principles of a Judeo-Christian ethic, but of course, America is not a theocracy. Christianity is not America's state religion, and ultimately, America is will fall (as with every other nation in the history of the world). Built into the founding documents of our nation are safeguards intended to preserve the "Christian morality" of the state for as long as possible, but fundamentally even the Constitution of America guarantees America's demise in so far as it is not (and cannot possibly be) a theocratic document of a theocratic nation. I wholeheartedly support the first ammendment of the United States constitution: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances." Of course this ammendment guarantees Christians and Muslims equal rights in the sharing of their faith. (How different this is from the church!) Constitutionally, homosexuals and adulterers cannot be excommunicated and expelled from the American community. (How very different this is from the Church! Cf. 1 Cor. 5:1-13) Constitutionally, people in America are free to worship whichever "god" they choose. (How very different this is from the Church! Cf. 1 Cor. 10:14)

I am incredibly grateful to God for the religious freedoms that we have in our country. I am grateful for the much more "moral" environment that we have in America as compared with other nations. I know that these blessings and privileges have come to us because our country was founded on the principles of a Judeo-Christian ethic. As John Quincy Adams said: "The Declaration of Independence . . . laid the cornerstone of human government upon the first precepts of Christianity." But even Deists like Thomas Jefferson (http://www.sullivan-county.com/deism/jefferson_deist.htm) and Universalist Unitarians like Julia Ward Howe can *claim* full agreement with the first precepts of Christianity (think of the Preamble to the Constitution; the Declaration of Independence; "In God We Trust"; "One nation under God"). Julia Ward Howe rejected the true Gospel of Jesus Christ, and yet she once said in a speech: It has been extremely edifying to hear of the good theories of duty and morality and piety which the various religions advocate. I will put them all on one basis, Christian and Jewish. . . . Laying the cornerstone of human government upon the first precepts of Christianity doesn't ultimately have *anything* to do with America being a Christian nation. ***America was not founded on the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Only the church is founded upon the Gospel.*** America can be called a "Christian nation" (in a very *qualified* sense) only in so far as the majority of it's citizens have been regenerated and born again unto true repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. By this definition, then, I am not sure that America has ever truly been a "Christian nation."

In light of all these things, let's go back to our original question. We said that it's a wonderful thing for our hearts to thrill in American patriotism. But what place does this kind of patriotic

thrill have *in the worship services of the Church*? Consider the following words from two of our “God and Country” Hymns:

My Country 'Tis of Thee

“*My native country, thee*, land of the noble free, *thy name I love*:

I love thy rocks and rills, thy woods and templed hills;

my heart with rapture thrills like that above.”

America, the Beautiful

“O beautiful for patriot dream that sees beyond the years
thine [America’s] alabaster cities gleam, undimmed by human tears!
America! America! God shed His grace on thee,
and crown thy good with brotherhood from sea to shining sea.”¹

But how can we sing these songs *in church*, where we remember only that we are “stranger[s] and... exile[s] on the earth” and that we are “*seeking* a homeland”, a “*better* country, that is, a heavenly one” (Heb. 11:13-16)? How can we sing of the gleam of *America’s* alabaster cities (one day “undimmed by human tears”?) when we know from Hebrews 11:16 that God “has prepared for [us] a [*heavenly*] city”?

- ✓ Galatians 4:26 – The Jerusalem above is free, and *she is our mother*.
- ✓ Hebrews 12:22-24 – *You have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem*, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.
- ✓ Cf. Revelation 21-22; Philippians 3:20

Conclusion

As Christians in America, it is often easy for us to very *subtly* and even *unconsciously* identify (or confuse, or mingle) the church with America. And yet we know that the church is bigger than any one nation, older than any nation, and will outlast all the nations – for the gates of hell will never prevail against the church (Mat. 16:18). By God’s sovereign decree, the church includes in its fold even from *before the foundation of the world* (Eph. 1:4) people “from every tribe and language and people and nation” (Rev. 5:9). So let us love the church! Let us remember that here in America we are aliens and strangers in a foreign land, *so that* we might more earnestly seek after our true homeland as citizens of the Israel of God! Yes, it’s a wonderful thing for our hearts to thrill in American patriotism. But *oh* may we always find that the spine-tingling thrill of our hearts is *infinitely greater* whenever we remember that in the *church*, we have come to a

¹ Katharine Lee Bates (composer of “America the Beautiful”) was deeply religious, though she was not certain of any one faith. She attended the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago where she saw “the ‘White City’ with its promise of the future contained within its alabaster buildings” (Wikipedia). This was the inspiration for her reference to “alabaster cities” in the fourth verse of “America, the Beautiful”. That these alabaster cities should one day be “undimmed by human tears” seems to indicate an optimistic view of human progress and advancement (for example, “She believed that through literature, human values could be revealed and developed”; About.com).

heavenly city and country – the Jerusalem that is above. In the church, instead of singing about America’s alabaster cities, we see how much more thrilling it must be to sing with the Psalmist:

- ✓ Psalm 46:4-5 – There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High. God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved; God will help her when morning dawns.
- ✓ Psalm 48:1-3, 8, 12-14 – Great is the LORD and greatly to be praised in the city of our God! His holy mountain, beautiful in elevation, is the joy of all the earth, Mount Zion, in the far north, the city of the great King. Within her citadels God has made himself known as a fortress... As we have heard, so have we seen in the city of the LORD of hosts, in the city of our God, which God will establish forever... Walk about Zion, go around her, number her towers, consider well her ramparts, go through her citadels, that you may tell the next generation that this is God, our God forever and ever.

Teaching our Children

In this first of a two-part series on “America and the Christian” we focused more on the negative aspects of this topic (in light of biblical principle). For most of our younger children, these considerations will probably not be as relevant. So the best way to pass this message on to our children is simply to be actively cultivating in them a deep love for the Church and an understanding of the believer’s citizenship in the heavenly city of Jerusalem. One day we want our children’s hearts to thrill and their eyes to tear up when they sing the great anthems of the Church and of their true homeland! In light of these things, you might want to reflect with your children on some of the following Scriptures (*compare* and *contrast* our citizenship in America with our membership in the church and citizenship in the heavenly Jerusalem):

- ✓ **Psalm 33:12; 1 Peter 2:9-10** (See above – II. C. 4. & 6.)
- ✓ **1 Peter 1:17; 2:11** (See above – III. B. 1. d. & e.)
- ✓ **Heb. 11:13-16; Gal. 4:26; Heb. 12:22-24; Phil. 3:20; Rev. 21-22** (See above – III. C. 2. a.-d.)
- ✓ **Mat. 16:18; Rev. 5:9; Ps. 46:4-5; 48:1-3, 8, 12-14** (See above – Conclusion A., B., D., & E)

Next week we will see how Christians should be the ideal, model citizens of any nation.

NOTE:

1. It is, of course, a very good and appropriate thing to teach our children the history of our nation and instill in them a gratefulness to God for the privilege of living in such a nation – founded as it was on the principles of a Judeo-Christian ethic!
2. While this heritage will probably cause most Christians to be more patriotic (including myself), I see the issues of national patriotism and our Christian heritage as fundamentally unrelated. If we were citizens of China, we might still raise our children with a healthy and even deeply rooted sense of patriotism.
3. This, in turn, leads us to see that for Christians, good citizenship has nothing to do with patriotism (“love for or devotion to one’s country”). A Christian who doesn’t feel at all patriotic may still meet all the biblical ideals for a citizen of the state. Patriotism, biblically, is neither here nor there – much like one’s loyalty to the Cubs or White Sox is neither here nor there (this example is admittedly on a much lower and more insignificant level). For the Christian, good citizenship stems *not* from a love for or devotion to one’s country, but from a love for and a devotion to God and His special commands to Christian citizens of the state (1 Timothy 2:1-2; Titus 3:1-2; Romans 13:1-7; 1 Peter 2:13-17).