

“God and Country”

By: Doug Warren

How do I love both God and country?

Since this is an election year I have been asked lots of questions about politics. Often folks get frustrated with me because I won't tell them how to vote (or because I won't tell other people to vote the way they are). Participation in civil government can be tricky to navigate especially in our current culture of polarization when it is common to characterize those with differing views as morally evil. So how do you love God and love your country with all its strengths and weaknesses?

It may be helpful for us to discuss a few foundational realities first. God created humans as social creatures. We are designed to live in relationship with Him and with one another. He not only hardwired us for these relationships; He has appointed authorities to govern them. God instituted the state to promote justice. He instituted the Church to promote His Kingdom. Both institutions serve God's purposes and He directs us to submit to each in their own unique sphere of sovereignty.

The other thing that we need to see is that we live in a world permeated by sin. I know that sin is not a popular word, but it does a lot to explain the realities around us and in us. While God has instituted both church and state as authorities over us, both are affected by humanity's rebellion against God. The institutions are filled with both good and bad people, all of whom individually have their own issues. What's more, we have our own rebellious habits that get thrown into the mix.

These are important in talking about how to go about loving our country. It is not enough just to wave the flag and be devoted. Neither is it enough to criticize everything the government does with which we don't agree. To be a good citizen in this or any other country requires understanding the scope and limitations of that citizenship. The country of our origins or naturalization is a gift of God. Yet its status in our lives is temporary. The duration does not make it insignificant. God calls us to obey Him in the state we have been given, but we must not confuse the temporary with the ultimate.

It is good and proper for us to love our country, but we are not to blindly accept all that she does or for which she stands. We can and should participate in civil affairs even knowing that much that is done by every political party and all of the branches of the governments is wrong. We can and should participate because while the state and the church will fail us, God is using them for His purposes.

So what are His purposes? He tells us in His Word, the Bible, that He is redeeming a people for Himself; that is, He is building His Kingdom. He is at work bringing all things to pass in such a way that in the end total justice will be served and all previous injustices will be made right. In that day His rightful reign will be universally

acknowledged. He uses all the kingdoms of men for this purpose. He raises some up and He brings others down on His timetable so that all might see His unparalleled majesty.

We can be proud to be Americans not because America has it all together (we don't), but because God has called us to be Americans and so we want to be the best Americans we can be for His honor and glory. With this understanding we are freed from being blind nationalists to be thoughtful patriots. If our hope is in Jesus and what He has promised to do, then while our nation or candidate or our particular party may disappoint us, we need not be disillusioned. When it is mistaken we can work to change it, because it is not the source of our hope.

The confluence of several significant national events has heightened our collective patriotism and raised significant questions. With the fiftieth anniversary of D-day, the dedication of the WWII monument, the state funeral for President Ronald Reagan and now Fourth of July, I have found myself choked up with emotion many times. I love my country. The powerful emotions evoked by such national events can be good and noble if they are constantly evaluated considering the tension between God's preserving work (state) and His redemptive work (church). We must always recognize God's ultimate sovereignty and our innate brokenness.

Unfortunately there are many today who do not even sense the tension in this predicament because they have united their civil and religious worlds. Whether expressed as utopian liberalism or moral majority, the great cause of civil programs is tied to a personal faith position in such a way that the two cannot be unmeshed. I believe this is unwise for both civil and religious pursuits. There should be a healthy tension between my love for God and my love for country. In fact, I don't believe that you can have either without the other. God calls us to love Him and our fellow man.

How do you love God and country? By loving God first and then loving the country He has blessed you with in ways that are glorifying to Him. It requires discernment as much as fervor. It will not be easy in a fallen world, but it is well worth the effort for the glory it brings to Christ.