PATRIOTISM, THE REFORMED CHRISTIAN, AND OUR CHRISTIAN PILGRIMAGE

On October 7, 1981, I spoke to the students of Covenant Christian High School on this topic. In a somewhat revised form I have prepared this paper from the notes I used for that chapel speech.

PATRIOTISM: WHAT IS IT?

During the course of the year certain days are designated for special festivities to remember important people and to recall significant events in the history of the United States of America. Days called Columbus Day, Independence Day, and Lincoln's Birthday are only a few of our national holidays. These national holidays elicit a feeling of national pride and gratitude which we call patriotism.

The Scottish poet, Sir Walter Scott, has said it well.

> Breathes there the man with soul so dead
> Who never to himself hath said,
> "This is my own, my native land!"
> Whose heart hath ne'er within him burned
> As home his footsteps he hath turned
> From wandering on a foreign strand?

Patriotism — what is it? *The Oxford Universal Dictionary* says,

> A patriot is one who exerts himself to promote the well-being of his country; one who maintains and defends his country's freedom or rights.

Patriotism or patriot is derived from a Greek word which means "of one's fathers" or "one's fatherland."

The implication of all this is that one who is patriotic is faithful to his homeland because it is the land of his heritage. One of the anthems extolling America says it well,

> My country! 'tis of thee,
> Sweet land of liberty,
> Of thee I sing;
> Land where my fathers died!
> Land of the Pilgrims' pride
> From every mountain side
> Let freedom ring!

Patriotism today seems to be outmoded. But who of us despite the pervasive cynicism of the times is not grateful for the freedom that we still experience in our homeland. We need not fear reprisal and repression because of our religious beliefs, although we see times coming when this will not be true.

Those who have travelled abroad have experienced the sensation of happiness for a fatherland – a country such as ours. Although all is not right in the country, the attitude that we Christian teachers and parents must adopt is one which supports the country in which we live and teach. Christian young people must be taught a proper attitude of respect for our country, for its symbols, and its institutions.

The apostle Peter writing to the strangers and pilgrims of his day says also to us, "Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake" (I Peter 2:13). He was in reality saying, "Be obedient, don't be a treasonist, be patriotic!"

Specifically that means that we give praise to God for our homeland and nation. God has caused us to spend our three-score years and ten or our four-score years in these U.S. of America. Christian Schools exercising privileges granted by the Constitution of the U.S. of America must teach properly the patriotism that Reformed Christians ought to exercise.

WHAT MUST OUR ATTITUDE BE TOWARD OUR NATION?

This question is a basic and an important question. Reformed Christians always have asked this question. During the tumultuous days of the Reformation disagreements arose between the Anabaptists and other leaders of the Reformation. Article 36 of the Netherlands Confession states that "we detest the Anabaptists and other seditious people, and in general all those who reject the higher powers and magistrates, and would subvert justice, introduce community of goods, and confound that decency and good order, which God hath established among men."

Our attitude in the first place must be one which gives evidence that we are filled with gratitude to our heavenly Father who cares for us through the agency of government. John Calvin says in the *Institutes*, that the "first duty of subjects towards their magistrates is to entertain the most honourable sentiments of their function, which they know to be a jurisdiction delegated to them from God, and on that account to esteem and reverence them as God's ministers and vice-regents." (Chapter 20, Book IV.)

God uses government and national institutions to care for us. Our

attitude ought to be like the attitude that Jeremiah recommended to the captives in pagan Babylon in the sixth century B.C.

> And seek the peace of the city whither I have caused you to be carried away captives, and pray unto the Lord for it: for in the peace thereof shall ye have peace (Jeremiah 29:7).

The captives from Judah were in Babylon. This was not their earthly fatherland. They were far from home and perhaps far from loved ones. They sang the songs of Zion in a strange land. "By the rivers of Babylon. . . we wept when we remembered Zion" (Psalm 137:1).

The letter of Jeremiah to the captives was an instructive letter. News had reached Jeremiah in Jerusalem that false prophets among the exiles were prophesying a speedy return to Palestine. Jeremiah was called to tell these exiles that the captivity would not be brief but that it would continue another 60 years. This meant that many of the optimistic captives who thought of an early return to Canaan were listening to prophecies that would never occur. Many would never return to Palestine, they would die in Babylon, and they would never again see Jerusalem.

The Babylonian captives were told to *live* in the land. They were to build houses, plant gardens, and live a normal life as believers in a strange land. They were to make that land their own land. Calvin in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* says,

> Here we see the Israelites, after having been stripped of all their property, torn from their habitations, driven into exile, and forced into a miserable servitude, were commanded to pray for the prosperity of their conqueror; not in the same manner in which we are all commanded to pray for our persecutors; but that his kingdom might be preserved in safety and tranquillity, and that they might live in prosperity under him. (Chapter 20, Book IV.)

We conclude, therefore, that we too are comprehended in the admonition and instruction of Jeremiah. Although we live in somewhat different circumstances the message of Jeremiah to the captives of Judah comes to us too, because the principles of proper behavior toward government are changeless. Just as the captives from Palestine were called to pray for the peace of the city so we are called to pray for the peace of the city. We are not called to be world shakers and world reformers but we are called to gratefully serve God as we serve the country in which God calls us to live. "For in the peace thereof shall ye have peace."

In the second place we should pray properly for the peace of our country. Our prayer for our country, which evidences a proper patriotic

attitude, should not be a carnal prayer. It may not be a prayer, which is like the prayers of the world, but it must be a proper prayer which is rooted in the attitude that we desire the church to have a quiet and peaceful life so that the gospel preaching by the messengers of mercy may have free course in the world and in our nation. Such praying will evidence that we submit quietly to the will of God in all things.

In I Timothy 2:1-3 we read,

> I exhort therefore, that first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men; for kings, and for all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty. For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour.

This instructive exhortation sent by the apostle Paul to youthful Timothy about seven centuries after the admonition of Jeremiah to the captives in Babylon teaches the New Testament church how to pray properly. During those days in which Timothy was bishop of Ephesus the church was in danger of persecution in the pagan Roman Empire. Did the church and its membership resist, or was she properly patriotic? Once again the church was reminded that she must pray for the peace of the city and the peace of the government for in the peace of the government the church shall have peace and the gospel shall have free course. This is well pleasing – "good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour."

In the third place our attitude toward the government and toward our country will be observed by our behaviour as citizens. We should be the best possible citizens. The communities in which you and I are called to live should be able to see in you and me that we are the best citizens that the community has.

In Titus 3:1-2 Paul writes as follows:

> Put them in mind to be subject to principalities and powers, to obey magistrates, to be ready to every good work, to speak evil of no man, to be no brawlers, and gentle, shewing all meekness to all men.

The classic passage describing the attitude that Christians must have toward government is found in Romans 13:1-3,

> Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers (government). For there is no power but of God; the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation. For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same.

From the foregoing it ought to be obvious that the Christian has the only correct motivation for true patriotism. He is patriotic for God's

sake. He is patriotic not merely because he has a kind of earthly love for country and for fatherland but he practices true patriotism, devotion for country, because he knows that all earthly powers exist for the sake of the coming of the eternal kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ.

The believer who loves much because he has been forgiven much shows by his behavior and confession that he understands what Solomon says in Proverbs 8:15.

> By me kings reign, and princes decree justice. By me princes rule, and nobles, even all the judges of the earth.

Our patriotism is not rooted in a belief in the principles of democracy. We respect government not because government is so beneficent, or is so responsive to the will of the people. Our attitude is far from that expressed in the phrase, "government of the people, for the people, and by the people." Our patriotism and respect for government and country is not rooted in some kind of social contract with the governed. No, rather *government is* ordained by God. Daniel says,

> God changeth the times and the seasons: he removeth kings and setteth up kings. Daniel 2:21.
>
> . . . the Most High ruleth in the kingdom of men, and giveth it to whomsoever he will. Daniel 4:17.

We show respect and are properly patriotic because "it is the bounden duty of every one, of what state, quality, or condition soever he may be, to subject himself to the magistrates; to pay tribute, to show due honor and respect to them, and to obey them in all things which are not repugnant to the Word of God." Netherlands Confession, Article 36.

Our patriotism is rooted in the firm belief that it is the bounden duty of everyone to honor, love and show fidelity to all in authority over me since it pleases God to govern us by their hand (cf. Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 39).

WHAT ABOUT PATRIOTISM AND OUR CHRISTIAN PILGRIMAGE?

The final question that we must ask and answer is the one stated above, "What about Patriotism and our Christian Pilgrimage?" One might justifiably ask the question, it would seem, whether our concern with national fidelity will not detract from the fidelity that we ought to have for the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ. Would it not be better for us to be more concerned with our heavenly country?

These are legitimate questions and they deserve an answer. The answer we give will determine our spiritual attitude in all these things.

In I Corinthians 7:30-31, Paul the apostle talks to the Corinthian church, a church that he loved dearly although he exhorted it severely.

> And they that weep, as though they wept not; and they that rejoice, as though they rejoiced not; and they that buy, as though they possessed not; and they that use this world, as not abusing it: for the fashion of this world passeth away.

In this particular section of the book of I Corinthians Paul stressed the spiritual attitude that we should have as citizens of this world. Among other spiritual lessons Paul says, "and they that buy, as though they possessed not." Paul is really saying that the members of Christ's church own without possessing. They own but they do not make that which they own their treasure. They that use this world do not abuse. This means simply that the members of the church do not use wrongly because abuse is improper use.

This passage from the Scripture describes for us the life style of the church here and now. If we are to follow the directives and principles of Holy Scripture, our patriotism and our love of country is always set in the perspective of the spiritual love that we have for the far greater country which we one day will have. That gives a unique dimension and direction to our submission to the God-ordained government of the state.

The apostle Peter shows that obedience to God determines our attitude toward the commands of men. In Acts 5:29 Peter and the other apostles said, "We ought to obey God rather than men." This does not mean, however, that Peter advocated anarchy and that he advocated an unpatriotic attitude. The same apostle writes to the elect strangers scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia, as follows:

> Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake; whether it be to the king as supreme; or unto governors, as unto them that are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and for the praise of them that do well (I Peter 2:13, 14).

We will be patriotic but we will not be patriotic if our patriotism means that we must sin against the commands of God. We, too, will obey God rather than man.

Our spiritual attitude will be like that of the great hero of faith – Moses, who could have been sinfully patriotic to Egypt. He had it all. It looked as if he were going to be the king of Egypt. Instead he was willing to suffer affliction with the people of God rather than enjoy

the pleasures of sin for a season. He esteemed the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt. He had respect unto the recompense of the reward. He esteemed the reproach of Christ greater riches than an imposing pyramid in Egypt. He esteemed the riches of Christ more respectable than to have his body carried around the world as one of the great specimens of history. He did not fear the wrath of the king (cf. Hebrews 11:24-27).

We sing and we should sing our national songs with enthusiasm and with respect. This shows our attitude of respect toward the government which God in His providence has given us. However, as we sing these national anthems we sing them in the full awareness that we have other important kingdom anthems like these:

I'm a pilgrim and I'm a stranger
I can tarry, I can tarry but a night
Do not detain me for I am going to
where the fountains are ever flowing.

I'm a pilgrim and I'm a stranger
I can tarry, I can tarry but a night.

The words of a paraphrase of Psalm 39:12 appear as follows:

I am a stranger here,
dependent on Thy grace,
A pilgrim as my fathers were,
with no abiding place.

The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews makes it possible for us to view our calling as citizens in this world while we are looking for the world to come.

> Wherefore we receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved, let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear (Hebrews 11:28).

Agatha Lubbers

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"A good teacher is not made in a few short years. But improvement is bound to result if serious, conscientious effort in the direction of betterment is perseveringly made."

— C.B. Eavey

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