

Dual Citizenship

[NOTE: One of the core principles of Roger Williams Baptists is the separation of Church and State. The following paragraphs explore that distinctive in the light of our celebration of Independence Day.]

Sometimes a person whose parents are citizens of two different countries is born with “dual citizenship.” Depending on the laws of the countries involved, and decisions made by that person when they come of age, they may choose to be citizens of one country or the other, or they may choose to maintain dual citizenship. If they retain dual citizenship, then there may arise cases in which they are compelled to decide where their ultimate loyalties lie. I would suggest that even the most patriotic follower of Christ lives in this world as a dual citizen – of their earthly country, and of that everlasting country which scripture calls “the kingdom of God.”

Often as we approach America’s Independence Day, we proudly review the faith roots of our nation’s history. “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed *by their Creator* with certain unalienable rights...” Remembering and celebrating this connection is a good thing. Our nation at her best has been a global force for good and a beacon of hope to the rest of the world, and we give thanks to God for it. In particular, I am incredibly grateful for our traditions of personal freedom, including the freedom of religion so often harshly limited in some other parts of the world, and for more than two hundred years of orderly successions of power from leader to leader and party to party.

At the same time, as a follower of Jesus, I acknowledge the tensions between my sincere patriotism and my faith. On the one hand, I remember Paul’s teaching in Romans 13: “*Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God*” (Romans 13:1). On the other hand, I remember the words of John in Revelation 18: “*I saw another angel coming down from heaven, having great authority ... He called out with a mighty voice, ‘Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great! ... Come out of her my people, so that you do not take part in her sin’*” (Revelation 18:1-2, 4).

The original reference in *both* of these passages is to the Roman Empire, whose extent and power then were comparable to that of our United States today. For Paul, the Roman Empire was on the whole a benevolent influence, in spite of conflicts and troubles he experienced along the way. The *Pax Romana* facilitated the rapid expansion of the Gospel, and Paul’s own Roman citizenship saved his neck in more than one tight spot. (Ironically, it is widely thought that Paul died during the persecution of Christians by the Roman Emperor Nero in 64 AD.) For

John, imprisoned by the Romans during a fierce time of persecution under the Emperor Domitian, the Empire was an evil and oppressive anti-God power.

We are reminded of the ambiguity of all earthly powers, even our own beloved nation. In principle, government is, as Paul teaches, part of God's ordering of human society for the common good. But sometimes government is captured by "principalities and powers", and Godly people must resist – and willingly take the consequences for their resistance. We remember the long tradition of "civil disobedience," which stretches from the apostles – "*But Peter and the apostles answered, 'We must obey God rather than any human authority'"* (Acts 5:29) -- to such modern figures as Dorothy Day, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Luther King, Jr. And in today's political climate, resistance in the name of Christian faith has sprung up on both the left and the right.

However we may identify ourselves politically, we must acknowledge that as Christians we are called upon to be loyal and responsible citizens in the spirit of Romans 13. But we are also called to exercise a God-formed judgment in the spirit of Jesus' teaching: "*Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's"* (Matthew 22:21). Some decisions and actions only God can request from us, and *ultimately* we answer to God alone for all decisions and actions.

We read in the Epistle to the Hebrews that we are, in the last resort, "*strangers and pilgrims on this earth"*, looking for "*a better country, that is, a heavenly one"* (Hebrews 11:13, 16). As loyal Americans and faithful Christians, we indeed possess a dual citizenship: in our earthly home country and in the everlasting heavenly country. We should be proud of our earthly country, and desire that she exercise her power for good. On Independence Day we raise the red, white and blue flag as a symbol of "liberty and justice for all." The heavenly country is represented, ironically, by the Roman cross on which Christ died to secure our freedom from sin and death. It is a symbol of humility, brokenness and death. But in God's economy, it is through brokenness and suffering that we are healed, and it is through the death of our Redeemer that we gain life everlasting, and a citizenship that claims our ultimate loyalty forever.

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