

## The Cross and the Flag 2014

This month will be the 238<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our Declaration of Independence. Often at this time of year 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. When I have returned from trips abroad or when I peruse the world news, 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 Roman Christians by the 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.

As Christians we are called upon to be loyal and responsible citizens in the spirit of Romans 13, but also 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 look to two very different symbols, a flag and a cross. One is a symbol of power and of pride. And we should be proud of our country, and desire her to exercise our power for good. The other 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. The power of God is masked by a cross, but it is the ultimate power in this world.

**Dr. David L. Wheeler**

**First Baptist Church of Portland, July 2014**