

Sam Moffett
Sermon

Christian Patriotism
July 3 - '38, Rolette

This week America celebrates the 4th of July. To the small boy it means firecrackers and skyrocket; to the fast young set it means a drink, a dance, and a headache; to the coroner and the sheriff, drunken drivers and long rows of silent, broken bodies. But what does it mean to the patriot? And what does it mean to the Christian?

Today the glorious fourth is as well known as Christmas, but up to the 18th century it was just another day in the year. Not even on the crowded calendar of the Roman Catholic church was the 4th honored by any patron. It seemed that nothing significant ever happened on the 4th of July.

Then, in 1776 something happened. On the 4th of July in that year a group of obscure colonists, gathered together on what must have seemed to Europe the very outskirts of civilization, Philadelphia, had the foolhardy daring to sign a document declaring the independence of their struggling little colony from the nation that ruled the seas. They were men of little fame. Lord North, prime-minister of all England under King George III, had scarcely heard of a one of them. But today the name of bold John Hancock who signed his name large and flourishing "in order," he said, "that King George may not need glasses to read it,"--is better known than even the pompous Lord North's. Many thought they were signing their death warrant. King George threatened thickly to hang every rascally one of them. But George died mad, and the nation whose birth was witnessed that day still lives. No death warrant that, but a proclamation of liberty, the Magna Charta of civilization. That document, the Declaration of Independence, was the birth certificate of our country.

But how could liberty be born in the forests of North America? The answer is not far to seek. The Declaration of Independence was a direct

outgrowth of and development from the Puritan ideal. It was the heritage passed on from those stalwart men and women who left their homes to sail across uncharted seas and finally to land on the bleak, inhospitable shores of the New England coast, that there they might be free to worship God according to the dictates of their own consciences. The Word of the Lord came to them as it had come to Abram of old: (Gen. 12: 1,2)

"Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will show thee: And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing."

Nor were the Puritans disobedient to the heavenly command, and in the new land which God showed unto them they found the religious liberty for which they were seeking.

150 year passed. Out of the wilderness the Puritans had carved a home for freedom, but now this principle of liberty for which they had lived and died was questioned by a government across the seas. So engrained was it, however, in the very fiber of American being that the colonies rose as one man in its defense. The War of American Independence was a war waged for liberty, religious as well as political. And on the 4th of July, in the second year of that war, this principle was set forth in systematic form for all the world to read and wonder.

87 year later the ideal of freedom for which the Puritans had toiled and suffered, for which the fathers of the Revolution had prayed and fought and died, was again challenged. Its universality was denied. Liberty was all very well for the white man, said some, but the black was little better than a beast. It was foolish to talk of liberty for him. They forgot that Christ died for black and white alike. They forgot that he had said:

"I am not willing that any man should perish. I die that all might have life."

So again men fought for freedom, and on the bloodiest battlefield of that

war a mighty exponent of liberty spoke immortal words, rephrasing and epitomizing the ideals of the Declaration of Independence:

"Fourscore and seven years ago," he said, "our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal."

This is the history of that freedom and liberty which binds us as patriots to our country. But what of the problem that faces the Christian patriot? Does he not have a double, conflicting allegiance? He is a citizen of two kingdoms. Can he, a citizen of the kingdom of God, be absolutely loyal to his country on earth? Can he serve two masters--God and Government? The answer is "Yes." New Testament teaching is clear on this subject. The fact that the Christian's citizenship is in heaven in no way frees him from the duties of good citizenship on earth. Christian freedom has its privileges and responsibilities.

Paul recognized the privileges of Roman citizenship, and though he was often carried away by the thought of the grandeur of his heavenly citizenship, he never lost sight of the fact that he was living here on earth. He stood upon his rights as a Roman citizen when the occasion demanded, as at Philippi where he had been beaten and imprisoned illegally, and at Jerusalem where he sought Roman protection from the mob. Paul's Roman citizenship was an aid in spreading the gospel, and even today the Christian can make use of his national rights to witness and testify of the kingdom of God. I had a schoolmate in college named Angoloff, a Bulgarian. For four years he had tried to take out papers for American citizenship, but there was some red tape always in the way. Now he recognizes these difficulties as the leading of the Lord, for when he prepared just this March to return to his native Bulgaria as a missionary, antagonistic authorities sought to exclude him as an alien, but they could not keep a Bulgarian from returning to his own country. So Angoloff, like Paul, discovered the privileges of earthly citizenship in a Christian ministry.

Even as Paul recognized the privileges of citizenship, he acknowledged its duties and responsibilities. Let me read from the text again, in the 13th chapter of his epistle to the Romans:

"Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God; the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power resisteth the ordinance of God....For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil..... Render therefore to all their dues; tribute to whom tribute is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor."

The lesson of the text is the lesson of Christian obedience, but like any other its meaning can be distorted. It was the misapplication of this passage that led the Stuarts of England to boast of the divine right of kings. The Christian believes in the divine right of the citizen as well as of the king. The God-given faculty of distinction between right and wrong inspired our forefathers to battle for freedom, but they did not lose sight of the truth given in this 13th chapter of Romans, that ever linked to freedom is responsibility. Freedom without responsibility is licence. The divine rights of the citizen always entail the patriotic duties of the citizen. The Christian earns his rights of citizenship by acting rightly in his capacity as a citizen.

Our God is a God of law and order. He ordained the perfect and orderly laws of the world of nature about us, and he enjoins upon us obedience to government and authority, even when these are imperfect, for an imperfect government is infinitely better than ungoverned anarchy and lawlessness. Think how corrupt the Roman government was whose authority Paul recognized when he wrote:

"Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. The powers that be are ordained of God."

There was only one road to political power at Rome--the road of military conquest along which Sulla, and Caesar and Augustus marched. Victory brought wealth--all the plundered wealth of conquered and enslaved peoples. Wealth thus acquired bought the fickle fancy of the Roman city mob which

controlled the elections of Rome. So corrupt became Roman government that at a later date, the imperial power and title of Emperor itself was bought for an unknown sum from the Praetorian guard by the richest miser of Rome. But corrupt though it was, it represented the established law, and to it the Christian owed allegiance--not blind allegiance, but intelligent, active allegiance, which by the proper exercise of its privileges seeks to improve and purify the government whose authority it acknowledges.

There was once a man who cried in an outburst of patriotism, "My country right, but right or wrong, my country!" Another greater than he, soberly replied, "My country, may she ever be right, but if she goes wrong, let me work to set her right." That is intelligent patriotism.

All the more is this important today when lawlessness is growing by leaps and bounds, when patriotism is sneered at, when loyalty to a union is placed above loyalty to the country, and when in this land the rights of personal liberty and personal property are callously ignored. The terms Christian, and loyal citizen, should in one sense be synonymous, and the loyal citizen needs no state militia to keep him loyal and law abiding.

My old scoutmaster served in France in 1917. As scouts we learned that his commands were to be obeyed, and obeyed instantly. In speaking of obedience he used to tell us the story of a returned soldier who was sent to town by his wife for eggs. He had not yet lost his sense of army discipline, and a mate of his saw him coming back with the eggs. In a playful mood, he called across the street, "Atton---shun!" Outok as a flash, ~~without waiting~~ to think, the ox-soldier straightened up and snapped to attention. The eggs were gone, spreading over the sidewalk before he realized the command no longer carried authority. Split-second obedience like that is a lost art today.

The Christian can do even more for his country than obey its

authority. That most practical of all the writers of the epistles, James, the brother of our Lord, writes in the 5th chapter, the 16th verse: "The effectual, fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much." And Paul adds, "Pray without ceasing." In the ministry of prayer the Christian can summon to the aid of his country all the power of God toward peace and justice and right government. How often do we pray for the officers of the government? Perhaps it is only when those of our own particular political persuasion are in power. If we are Republicans, it is all very easy to pray for a Republican governor or president; or if we are Democrats it is easier to try to pray a Republican officer out of power than to pray for him. It takes Christian grace to pray for those with whom we disagree politically, but that is the command of the Word of God. Samuel, the prophet, though he was no longer in sympathy with King Saul, and though he was soon to anoint David king, yet said unto Saul, "God forbid that I should sin against the Lord in ceasing to pray for you. (I Sam. 12:23)

The most beautiful postage stamp ever issued by the United States depicts Washington, father of our country, not as a victorious general astride his charger, nor yet as a conqueror fearlessly leading his troops into battle, but the artist has rather chosen to picture the scene which shows the secret of Washington's strength. There in the snows of Valley Forge, at the most discouraging point in his career, the first president of the United States kneels in silent prayer before the King of Kings. The patriot prays for his country.

Prayer, and loyal, intelligent obedience--these are the duties of the Christian patriot. Does he ever disobey the dictates of governmental authority? If your first reaction is to answer "No", think again. For the New Testament does give one excuse for disobedience to those in positions of authority. It is illustrated in the 5th chapter of the Acts. The Apostles had received their commission to preach the gospel in all lands

from Jesus just before he departed from them into heaven. And naturally enough they started their preaching in the streets of their own city, Jerusalem. When the ecclesiastical authorities forbade them to preach, there was but one answer, simply, "Ye ought to obey God rather than men." This is absolutely logical. Our text tells us that earthly rulers are the ministers of God, their authority is derived from Him. God's will, therefore, is the highest command. And when the laws of this world are so fashioned as to contradict the laws of God as found in his Word, they have lost their authority.

We can find a present-day illustration of this in Korea. When Japan made student attendance at the state Shinto shrines compulsory, and when it ordered Christians and non-Christians alike to pay their respects to the spirits of departed soldiers, and when it further required Christians to bow to the Emperor as the divine son of Amaterasu, the sun goddess; then its laws contradicted the first commandment of God, "Thou shalt have no other gods before me." Dr. McCune, president of the Union Christian College in Pyongyang which my own father founded, courageously defied the edict, declaring, "I will not order my students to do that which I, as a Christian, cannot conscientiously do myself." When the laws of God conflict with the laws of men, there is only one course open to the Christian. "Ye ought to obey God rather than men."

The Christian American may well thank God for his citizenship and his laws, contrasted as they are with this dark picture of godless laws in a foreign land. His laws were written by God-fearing men. Behind them is all the authority of God's unassailable Word. Today we can think of the Declaration of Independence as man's endorsement, as one man has put it, of the Gospel of Christ. It guarantees the American the rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. These can be found only in Christ who promised them, saying, "I am the way, the truth and the life." In Christ man finds the truest liberty.