

A Critique of Patriotic Celebration in Church

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The Fourth of July productions often rival Christmas celebrations in many American churches. Some present epic fireworks displays while Sunday services honor veterans of the U.S. Armed Forces. Although there is nothing inherently improper about celebrating the Fourth, it is appropriate to distinguish American values with those of the Church.

Having recently celebrated the Fourth, I want to suggest several reasons why the American Church must rethink carefully how it celebrates the Fourth, raising some important questions for church musicians. What is the Church's composition and purpose? How do traditional patriotic hymns support its responsibilities?

Composition

When Jesus Christ died on the cross, He "purchased for God persons from every tribe, language, people, and nation," according to Revelation 5:9 (NET). Consequently, the Church is diverse on multiple levels. For example, God did not choose only those who speak a certain language for salvation, nor must His disciples learn any particular language in order to maintain their relationship with Him. In addition, the Church contains individuals from every ethnicity. The word rendered "nation," *ethnous*, does not mean a political entity, but rather a people group. Although Christ did not redeem *every person* from every tribe or language or people group (universalism), He did redeem representatives from each. The point of Revelation 5:9, among other things, is that the Church's composition is maximally diversified.

Local churches within a specific culture must always view themselves within the larger body of believers worldwide. The American Church cannot forget that some Arabs, Jews, Indians, Chinese, and South Americans also worship the true God and Savior, Jesus Christ. Although there may be advantages to being American, patriotism should never become confused with Christianity; the line between being blessed spiritually and politically cannot be blurred. Furthermore, as Edmund Clowney writes, "The transcending identity of the church does not erase ethnic [or cultural] ties, but it bars them from demanding primary, and therefore idolatrous, loyalty." The Church must strike the correct balance between its loyalty to the kingdom of God and the earthly society in which it exists, always emphasizing its spiritual over its earthly status.

Purpose

The church exists to glorify God, and as the Westminster Catechism begins, “to enjoy Him forever.” Three times in Ephesians 1:1-14 Paul writes that our salvation was to praise God and/or His grace. What this means is that we must live a life worthy of a follower of Jesus Christ, obeying the commandments and guidelines prescribed for godly living as an act of love for Christ, and enjoying the grace in which we now stand. We are to educate and evangelize to the glory of God (Matt. 28:19-20). Ultimately this means to continue the mission that Jesus Christ established during His days on earth. We are to proclaim the gospel of hope and peace through Jesus to a dying world. Being the Body of Christ means taking care of the sick, the needy, the despairing, and the rebellious.

Hymnody

As I scoured through hymnals in search of patriotic songs, my primary concern for them was that they be theologically sound and God-honoring. How well do these patriotic songs square with this standard?

Among the most familiar patriotic songs is “**My Country, 'Tis of Thee,**” written by Samuel Smith in 1831. The first three verses praise America’s marvelous asset: freedom. It acknowledges God as “author of liberty” and asks for His protection. That Smith would refer to the “Great God, our King” in verse four is significant in that the time lapse between Britain’s rule over colonial America was well within recent memory for many people singing this great song. They would recall the tyranny under King George III, whereas Smith’s God is the author of liberty—what a striking contrast!

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 mountainside let freedom ring!

My native country, thee, land of the noble free, thy name I love;
I love thy rocks and rills, thy woods and templed hills;
my heart with rapture thrills, like that above.

Let music swell the breeze, and ring from all the trees sweet freedom's song;
Let mortal tongues awake; let all that breathe partake;
let rocks their silence break, the sound prolong.

Our fathers' God, to thee, author of liberty, to thee we sing;
Long may our land be bright with freedom's holy light;
protect us by thy might, great God, our King.

One important concern might be raised for church usage from the spirit of this hymn. There is no true liberty apart from Jesus Christ. Even though Smith praises God for being the source of liberty, the lack of references to the atonement leaves this doctrinal cornerstone ambiguous to the average church member. The pastor or church musician might consider using this hymn as an opportunity to clarify some details about how God is the author of liberty. This might lead to a sermon on Galatians 5, or John 8:36, which reads, “So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.”

Although “**America the Beautiful**” is a hymn of praise, the object of Katharine Lee Bates’ affection was our nation. The third line of each verse contains the only mention of God, where Bates asks for God’s grace, mending America’s flaws, and refining her gold. As a believer, I cannot readily affirm singing this song in a Christian service because there is simply nothing “Christian” about it. The piece contributes little to our adoration of Christ and contains no spiritual truths. If it were sung, it would need special attention from the pulpit to distinguish it as “American,” not “Christian.” Hymn compilers would be wise to consider these observations when deciding whether to include it in hymnals in the future.

O beautiful for spacious skies, for amber waves of grain;
For purple mountain majesties above the fruited plain!
America! America! God shed his grace on thee,
And crown thy good with brotherhood from sea to shining sea.

O beautiful for heroes proved in liberating strife,
Who more than self their country loved, and mercy more than life!
America! America! May God thy gold refine,
Till all success be nobleness, and every gain divine.

O beautiful for patriot dream that sees beyond the years
Thine alabaster cities gleam, undimmed by human tears!
America! America! God mend thine every flaw,
Confirm thy soul in self-control, thy liberty in law.

Occasionally tunes with **2 Chronicles 7:14** are sung or placed in the hymnal with other patriotic music: “If My people who are called by My name humble themselves and pray and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, will forgive their sin and will heal their land.” Although it is acceptable for the church to sing this text in another context, it is dangerous to confuse “my people” with Christian Americans. In its original context the verse speaks of Israel—God’s chosen people in the Old Testament—and America is not a replacement of Israel in God’s program. Historically some have seen America as a distinctly Christian nation (i.e. the

Mayflower, freed slaves), but this country does not enjoy a covenantal relationship with God. Many congregants are unaware of this fact, therefore to use 2 Chronicles 7:14 in any setting during patriotic holidays tends to perpetuate that myth. It is ill-advised to use this passage for patriotic events.

Aside from not mentioning Christ specifically, the national hymn, “**God of Our Fathers,**” contains remarkable lyrics. Written by Daniel Roberts, the hymn expresses God’s guidance in the country’s past and prays for the nation to walk in His ways in the future.

God of our fathers, Whose almighty hand
Leads forth in beauty all the starry band
Of shining worlds in splendor through the skies
Our grateful songs before Thy throne arise.

Thy love divine hath led us in the past,
In this free land by Thee our lot is cast,
Be Thou our Ruler, Guardian, Guide and Stay,
Thy Word our law, Thy paths our chosen way.

From war’s alarms, from deadly pestilence,
Be Thy strong arm our ever sure defense;
Thy true religion in our hearts increase,
Thy bounteous goodness nourish us in peace.

Refresh Thy people on their toilsome way,
Lead us from night to never ending day;
Fill all our lives with love and grace divine,
And glory, laud, and praise be ever Thine.

All four verses are addressed to God directly, petitioning His continued direction, acknowledging His sovereign, gracious rule. In contrast to many other patriotic songs, there is no mention of His blessing America; rather, I sense that Roberts saw the nation’s deep dependence on God. “God of Our Fathers” is a model patriotic hymn.

Conclusion

The Church belongs to Christ, who redeemed it for Himself. Its members are not selected by their racial, ethnic, or linguistic traits. In view of its diverse composition, local churches must maintain a global mindset in order to view itself biblically. In particular, church musicians can choose hymns for patriotic occasions carefully by judging whether they edify believers and exalt Christ within the larger context of the worldwide church. The implications for encouraging global-minded thinking may be impressive for race relations, missions, and global cooperation.

Food For Thought

- What would happen if an immigrant who once served in another country's armed services appeared in an American church on a special holiday? Would he feel alienated from the other believers within that congregation? Is this acceptable in a Christian worship service?
- What if the church lived in celebration of the freedom from bondage to sin and death from which Christ delivered us? How differently would the church interact and live?
- Read "The Battle Hymn of the Republic." It was written during the Civil War (1862) by Julia Ward Howe. Is the text compelling enough to justify using it during a Christian worship service? Is the Civil War imagery in verse 2 helpful? Does the military imagery supplement or detract from the theologically rich statements?

Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord;
He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored;
He hath loosed the fateful lightning of His terrible swift sword;
His truth is marching on.

Chorus: Glory! Glory! Hallelujah! Glory! Glory! Hallelujah!
Glory! Glory! Hallelujah! His truth is marching on.

I have seen Him in the watch fires of a hundred circling camps
They have builded Him an altar in the evening dews and damps;
I can read His righteous sentence by the dim and flaring lamps;
His day is marching on.

I have read a fiery Gospel writ in burnished rows of steel;
"As ye deal with My contemners, so with you My grace shall deal";
Let the Hero, born of woman, crush the serpent with His heel,
Since God is marching on.

He has sounded forth the trumpet that shall never call retreat;
He is sifting out the hearts of men before His judgment seat;
Oh, be swift, my soul, to answer Him! be jubilant, my feet;
Our God is marching on.

In the beauty of the lilies Christ was born across the sea,
With a glory in His bosom that transfigures you and me:
As He died to make men holy, let us live to make men free;
[originally ...let us *die* to make men free]
While God is marching on.

He is coming like the glory of the morning on the wave,
He is wisdom to the mighty, He is honor to the brave;
So the world shall be His footstool, and the soul of wrong His slave,
Our God is marching on.