

ONE NATION UNDER GOD

Deuteronomy 10:12-13, 17-21

Galatians 5:13-17, 22-26

*What does it mean to be
an American Christian?*

A sermon preached by
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When I was receiving my basic education at Fred Whiteside Elementary School in Camden, Arkansas, we began every day standing beside our desks and reciting the Pledge of Allegiance: “I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, and to the republic for which it stands, one nation, under God, with liberty and justice for all.” Those words are so powerful that I almost always want to add “Amen” to the end!

The Pledge of Allegiance was written in 1892 by a Christian socialist minister named Francis Bellamy, for a family magazine called *The Youth's Companion*. Bellamy also made up a salute to go with it, which was dropped during World War II because it resembled a Nazi salute.¹

The words “under God” were not actually added to the pledge until 1954. Adding those words had been under discussion for some time, but on Lincoln’s birthday in 1954, President Dwight Eisenhower attended church at Lincoln’s church, the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in Washington, D.C. The pastor, George Docherty, preached a sermon encouraging the addition of the words, “under God” into the pledge. During the Cold War era, many thought the words could be an antidote to atheistic Communism that was threatening the American way of life. Eisenhower listened to the sermon, and the next day he had a bill introduced to Congress. By Flag Day on June 14 of 1954, America was pledging allegiance to the flag of a nation under God.²

We are a nation under God, as all nations are under God, whether they acknowledge it or not. God has been part of the national political conversation since the first European settlers came to America. And down through our history, different factions have claimed the favor of God for their side. We are still having that argument today. Some claim the Republicans are more Christian; others say it’s the Democrats. I think you and I both know that God has no party affiliation. That’s one reason I am glad to be a United Methodist; we’re a big tent church, and there are people from all across the political spectrum who gather under this tent to worship God. We used to say that the United Methodist Church was the church of both Hillary Clinton and George Bush, which it still is. Today we can say that the UMC is the home of both Elizabeth Warren, the

progressive Democratic Senator from Massachusetts, and Tom Cotton, the conservative Republican Senator from Arkansas. Regardless of our party or politics, we are all still a nation under God.

However, that sense of the blessing and calling of God has been diminished by the trials we have been through in the last couple of years. George Barna, one of the top Christian researchers in the country, did a study of the attitudes of adults toward their country in 2019 and again in 2021. Christians, not surprisingly, are still more positive about the connection between God and country. But citing factors such as the pandemic, racial unrest, the contentious 2020 election season, and the insurrection at the Capitol in January, Barna says that there has been a significant shift in American adults. Fewer people today are willing to agree that America is particularly blessed by God or chosen by God.³ Of course, this follows the larger trend over the last 20 years for fewer and fewer people to affiliate with organized religion and the increasing secularity of American culture.

So let me take a counter-cultural stance here today. I believe America is blessed by God, and I believe America is called by God to a great purpose. That doesn't mean God loves America more than any other nation, or that other nations don't also have blessings and callings. But I believe there is something to say about being a Christian in the United States of America in 2021. What does it mean to be a Christian in America today?

It means **our primary allegiance is to God**. We pledge allegiance to our flag, but we understand that our loyalty to God comes first. This is the first Commandment that God gave to Moses all those years ago: *"I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me."*⁴

We saw an example of this a few weeks ago when we were studying the apostles in the Book of Acts. When Peter and John were arrested and commanded by the authorities not to speak in the name of Jesus, they replied, *"Whether it is right in God's sight to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; for we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard."*⁵ The government can say and do and require and

legislate however it pleases. A Christian's primary allegiance is to God.

This loyalty to God drove the prophetic tradition in the Old Testament. That was the prophet's job—to speak God's truth to the king. And ever since, religious leaders have been speaking truth to power, calling into question when the leaders of the nation stray from God's way. That's still our job today.

One of the prophets of the 20th century was Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the pastor, professor, and martyr in Nazi Germany. The church in Germany failed to hold the Nazi regime responsible for its oppression and violence. They went along and even supported Hitler. It was up to a few prophets crying in the wilderness to raise the voice of protest. Bonhoeffer wrote, "Christianity stands or falls with its revolutionary protest against violence, arbitrariness, and pride of power, and with its plea for the weak. Christians are doing too little to make these points clear ... Christendom adjusts itself far too easily to the worship of power. Christians should give more offense, shock the world far more, than they are doing now."⁶ For his loyalty to God, Bonhoeffer was arrested and eventually hanged.

For Christians in America (and anywhere), our primary allegiance is God. **Our primary commitment should be to justice.** A church, a community, or a nation can be judged by how it takes care of the vulnerable people in their midst. We are called to compassion as the people of God. If someone is oppressed or distressed or repressed, that's our baby! We are called to help; we are committed to justice.

This commitment is basic to our Biblical understanding of life. Our reading from Deuteronomy calls us to care for the widows, the orphans, and the strangers, the immigrants in the land. It is God "*who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing.*"⁷ The same commitment carries over into the teaching of Jesus, who told the story about the Great Judgment, how the king would separate the sheep from the goats, and the reward would come to those who gave food to the hungry, water to the thirsty, welcome to the lonely, clothes to the naked, compassion to the sick and imprisoned. When the sheep questioned when they had done all this, the king said, "*Truly I tell you, just as you*

did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” ⁸ Good American Christians have a commitment to justice for the least of these, because they are our brothers and our sisters. They are Christ among us.

One of the most recognizable symbols of America is the Statue of Liberty. She stands over 300 feet tall at the entrance to New York City harbor. It was a gift of the nation of France, and she has been welcoming visitors and immigrants to the United States since 1886.

On the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty is a poem written by Emma Lazarus, comparing the Statue of Liberty to the Colossus of Rhodes, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. You probably remember the last lines, but the entire poem speaks to the new way of thinking in America, a new vision of liberty, a new type of society, a new commitment to justice. The poem is called “The New Colossus”:

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glow world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
"Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she
With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"⁹

As American Christians, our primary allegiance is to God, our primary commitment is to justice, and **our primary value is love**. This is the command of Jesus, the new commandment to “*love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.*”¹⁰ Not only to love our friends, but to love our enemies. To love those across the aisle politically. To love those who are different in so many

ways. To love those we don't even understand why they are like they are. Just love the heck out of 'em anyway.

This kind of love is based on a deep respect of every single other person as a child of God, endowed by the Creator with worth and dignity. This love is the basis of our freedom. As Paul wrote to the Galatians, *"For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'"*¹¹ This freedom of respect, based in love, leads us to the Beloved Community that is God's dream for every church, community, and nation.

"The Beloved Community" is a phrase that was coined by the philosopher Josiah Royce early in the 20th century. Royce influenced the seminary professors at Boston School of Theology, who in turn influenced a young student from Georgia named Martin Luther King, Jr. King took the idea of Beloved Community and made it the goal of the civil rights movement. In the end, the Civil Rights movement was not just about justice for Black people, it was about justice for everyone. It was about a day when all people, regardless of nation, race, or creed would live together in a Beloved Community, based on the value of love, the love we see in Jesus Christ.

As early as 1956, King was talking about the goal of Beloved Community. In a speech at a victory rally at the end of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, King said, "the end is reconciliation; the end is redemption; the end is the creation of the Beloved Community. It is this type of spirit and this type of love that can transform opponents into friends. It is this type of understanding [and] goodwill that will transform the deep gloom of the old age into the exuberant gladness of the new age. It is this love which will bring about miracles in the hearts of [people]."¹²

In our beloved country today, we have not yet achieved the Beloved Community. We live in a land of deep divisions. I wish I could say that such a state is unprecedented, but if you read history, you know it's not. But that doesn't make it good or right or acceptable. Perhaps we could take a cue from a place that has been deeply divided for longer than we have been a country. In

Ireland, there have been divisions to the point of violence between Catholics and Protestants for over 400 years. There is a city called Londonderry (or just Derry, depending on which side you're on). In 2011, they built a bridge over the river separating the two sides of the city, populated mostly by the Catholics on one side and Protestants on the other. It's a long, curving bridge designed for walking and bicycle traffic only. It was designed to encourage the different factions in the city to walk or bike across and meet their neighbors and maybe find out that they weren't so bad after all. The structure is called the Peace Bridge.¹³

I believe we could build a bridge to peace in America today. It would be a bridge where the primary allegiance is not to country or state or race or party, but to God. It would be a bridge where the primary commitment is to justice for all God's children. It would be a bridge where love is the primary value, and the bridge would lead to the Beloved Community. Let this be the bridge to our neighbors, to our enemies, to an America that is blessed by God and called to be a light of freedom to the world!

¹ <https://www.ushistory.org/documents/pledge.htm>.

² <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/retropolis/wp/2018/06/14/the-gripping-sermon-that-got-under-god-added-to-the-pledge-of-allegiance-on-flag-day/>.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pledge_of_Allegiance.

³ <https://www.barna.com/research/perceptions-of-america/>.

⁴ Exodus 20:2.

⁵ Acts 4:19.

⁶ Tom Fuerst, “Three Ways the Church Can Respond to the Capitol Building Riot,” *Ministry Matters*, 1/14/21.

⁷ Deuteronomy 10:18.

⁸ Matthew 25:40.

⁹ Emma Lazarus, “The New Colossus,” *Wikipedia.com*.

¹⁰ John 13:34f.

¹¹ Galatians 5:13f.

¹² <https://thekingcenter.org/about-tkc/the-king-philosophy/>.

¹³ Mark Simpson, “New peace bridge is symbol of hope in 'stroke city”” BBC (6-24-11). [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peace_Bridge_\(Foyle\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peace_Bridge_(Foyle)).