

"Of Flags and Crosses"

Galatians 6:11-16

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On this 4th of July weekend, from one end of our country to the other, events are already underway to celebrate Independence Day, the anniversary of our nation's founding. In every great city and every small hamlet, you will see lots of picnics and parades with an array of fireworks to light up the night sky when evening comes. However, for most people, the American flag remains THE PRE-EMINENT patriotic symbol. Every year on this date, you'll see it prominently displayed on people's front porches, featured on jeans and tee shirts and in decals on the backs of their cars and pick-up trucks. And it becomes a symbolic way of letting others know how much their country and its freedoms mean to them- the one secular representation that takes on an almost sacred aura.

But not every American feels that way. At the 1984 Republican convention which was held in Dallas that year, a protester drew a one-year prison sentence for BURNING a flag. He subsequently appealed his conviction, fighting it all the way up to the Supreme Court where it ruled in a close 5-4 decision that burning the American flag COULD be considered an act of legitimate political protest under the First Amendment. "The hard fact," said Justice Kennedy, a conservative who supported the majority, "is that sometimes we must make decisions we do not like...It is poignant but fundamental that the flag protects those who hold it in contempt." Constitutional protection is all the more important for speech that is repellent, argued Justice William Brennan, who led the majority: this is the "bedrock principle underlying the First Amendment."

Following the ruling, the Christian Science Monitor published an editorial entitled "Torching the Flag." This is what it said:

We don't hold with burning the American flag. Putting a match to Old Glory is a repugnant manner of protest. The contemptuousness behind such an act- or displaying the flag on a museum floor as a doormat- isn't the hallmark of a thoughtful, informed, and mature political outlook.

But we also don't hold with prosecuting those who burn flags as a form of otherwise unthreatening protest. So we accept the Supreme Court's decision last week protecting the flag desecration as a type of symbolic speech shielded by the First Amendment...

Whether as American citizens or simply as lovers of freedom and equality, we cherish the Stars and Stripes. We cherish it, though, not as a piece of colorful fabric, but as a symbol of noble ideals about human beings and government, about "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

YOU CAN'T TORCH SUCH IDEALS. You can ridicule them, of course, but the ridicule is far more stinging in a reasoned essay about American shortcomings than by an act of petty arson. If America is strong and self-confident enough to allow the essay, it's certainly great

enough to shrug off the match. As Justice Brennan wrote, "our toleration of criticism...is a sign and source of our strength."

What you can reason from that is that a patriot isn't necessarily one who can say the Pledge of Allegiance the loudest or who never forgets to unfurl the flag from his porch every Flag Day or Fourth of July or who marches in all the VFW parades as ANYBODY can do that. When you watch the videos of the men and women who ransacked the Capitol building a year and a half ago, attacking police officers, breaking in windows and storming its hallways, demanding the deaths of the Vice-President and Speaker of the House, these were not American patriots DESPITE all the flags they waived and flag patches on their jackets. In truth, they represented the VERY OPPOSITE of how REAL patriots act. As far as I'M concerned, a patriot, is someone who embodies the highest and best values our nation has to offer: Someone who is honest, kind, and generous; someone who works intelligently and industriously in all he or she does; someone who wants to improve our society but won't step over other people in order to do it.

History has shown us that there have been two main traditions concerning the essential meaning of "patriotism." There is one that implies unquestioned loyalty to one's country REGARDLESS of its policies. You may remember seeing those bumper stickers some years back that preached, "Get your heart in America or get your rear end out," implying that a TRUE patriot can only be someone who supports the President and the government whether for good or for ill. The OTHER tradition says that a patriot is not someone who is uncritically wedded to our country REGARDLESS, but one who is devoted FOREMOST to our nation's democratic principles and believes in upholding the ideals that our country represents. The FIRST or UNQUESTIONING form of patriotism is a most dangerous creed and it has often expressed itself in a lot anti-immigration sentiment, in the internment of Japanese-Americans during WWII, in McCarthyism, and in slogans such as "America, love it or leave it" which was so popular during the Vietnam era. Since the end of the Second World War, the latter and MORE DEMOCRATIC form of the term has represented not just victory over fascism but in seeing our original principles of life, liberty, and justice for all extended to EVERYONE. It recognizes the dignity and rights of those who've had them denied far too long- to women, to Blacks, and to the handicapped; to gays, lesbians, and transgendered persons among others. Thus it's easy to see how one person's definition of "patriotism" just may be another's person's definition of what is "UN-AMERICAN" and vice versa.

This equally applies to matters of FAITH as the correlation between patriotism and faith is much closer than we would think. Just as people can imperiously wrap themselves in the flag as though they were the only TRUE Americans around, people can just AS easily wrap themselves in the CROSS and their vision may be just as narrow. I remember going to church services years ago in another denomination where preacher after preacher insisted that all Catholics were going to hell, that the Jews were all "Christ killers," and that the Blacks were the accursed "sons of Ham"- Ham being the son of Noah who exposed his father's nakedness. And of course, we've all heard of those who advocate blowing up abortion clinics or even killing the doctors who perform them, while others burn crosses in people's front yards- all the while justifying it in the name of God. Two weeks ago, I read about a Christian minister who was calling for the execution of all gays and lesbians, lamenting how we've gotten away from Old

Testament laws while yesterday I saw in the paper how some pastors are advocating that women who receive an abortion in their state—even in cases involving rape or incest--should be tried for murder.

Yes, we can easily wrap ourselves in tracts and bumper stickers, in overt religiosity and yet be so empty of the REAL Spirit of Christ inside. It's just more proof that it's far easier to PLAY church than to BE the church in the world. For my money, a REAL Christian isn't necessarily someone who can recite large passages of the Bible at the drop of a hat, someone who has had perfect Sunday School attendance for the last twenty-five years, or who always tithes ten percent of his or her income. As far as I'm concerned, a REAL Christian is foremost someone who embodies that which is highest and best our faith has to offer, someone who not just wears a cross OVER their heart but carries it IN their heart as well.

The issue of what is a “TRUE Christian,” just like what is a “TRUE patriot,” is one St. Paul was forced to settle in his epistle to the Galatians. Writing to a congregation he himself had founded, he registers his concern over how after teaching them we are all saved by faith due to the saving work of Christ and not of our own works, a group of Judaizers—that is, a faction of Jewish Christians—appeared teaching that Christian converts were obliged to observe circumcision and other directives under the Mosaic Law before they could become fully-fledged Christians. To Paul, the idea that one must first become a Jew before becoming a Christian was regressive and a very denial of the grace he had initially proclaimed. The Mosaic law which the Jews trusted in was never meant to be the means of their salvation but to prepare their hearts to accept the NEW LIFE BASED ON FAITH and not works. Instead of the guilt and despair that came from one's inability to adhere to the Law in all its aspects, Christ came to FREE them from such legalism that they might lead lives filled with his Spirit instead- lives full of his peace and love and joy. What they could not do on their own, Christ himself had accomplished on their behalf. To Paul, this new life, infused with the renewing power of the Spirit of Christ, constituted us as part of a “new creation.”

The question of what it means to be a GOOD or TRUE Christian just like what it means to be a GOOD or TRUE PATRIOT will always be ongoing. Years ago, after I had transferred from a large liberal university where I was a rebel and student protester to a small Pentecostal Bible college where I had to learn to be a conformist, I found myself having to obey lots of rules and regulations, none of which had ANYTHING to do with my salvation or helping me grow in grace. For instance, everyone had to be in their dorms by 10:00 p.m. regardless of how old you were. You couldn't wear any beards or mustaches nor have hair below your collar line. There was no hand-holding with members of the opposite sex and certainly no smoking or drinking. Even such “worldly pursuits” as going to movies or playing cards or listening to hard rock music were frowned upon. We had to be in chapel five times a week and if you missed more than three during the course of a semester, you faced expulsion. To be honest, most of it was rather harmless and even quite silly. Instead of a Christian university, I thought I had mistakenly wound up at a MONASTERY, training to become a PHARISEE rather than a minister of the gospel!

However, the reality was that as time went on, I was able to discern just how arbitrary and non-essential these restrictions and prohibitions actually were; that as we mature in our

Christian life, we develop greater clarity and understanding into that which is necessary about our faith as opposed to that which is NOT. Therefore, instead of relying upon a lot of rules and regulations to guide us, over time we begin to develop an inner compass which helps us to make right and responsible decisions. When I now look back to those years I spent in Bible college, I now see how those rules which once figured so prominently in my life really functioned as a form of SPIRITUAL TRAINING WHEELS. By providing me with some structure, they kept me from continually falling down as I was learning to follow our Lord. Eventually, as my sojourn with him progressed, I was able to put aside those training wheels and trust more and more the little voice inside of me which would instruct me in the ways I should go. I found that as I continued to pray and worship and study God's Word on my own, allowing its truths to mold both my mind and my conscience, God--through his Holy Spirit--was now applying those principles to my heart with the result that Christ took GREATER root in me, shaping more of my inner life to his own.

Of course, nobody helps us to understand this relationship between obedience to the Law and the Christian freedom that comes from listening to and following the Spirit better than Christ himself. He said he had not come to abolish the Law but just the OPPOSITE- to FULFILL it. What he DID was show how the Law was meant to be an instructor in the ways we should go and never the instrument or means of our salvation; the Law could condemn but it was powerless to save ANYBODY. God did not give Moses the Law with the intention that if they rigorously adhered to those laws, he would love them and they would be saved. They could never do ANYTHING to warrant God's love or earn their salvation- God's love for his people was completely a free gift that came straight from his own heart.

JESUS, on the other hand, narrowed God's commandments down to just TWO which for him summed up the essentials of the Law and the teachings of the prophets: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul, with all your strength and all your mind; and you shall love your neighbor as you love yourself. Like the Jewish prophets before him, he understood that God--his Heavenly Father--was not interested in the blood of bulls and goats but in JUSTICE and FAITHFULNESS and, above all, LOVE. God was primarily concerned about PEOPLE, about restoring their relationships with him and with others, in making them whole in mind and body and in spirit. As such, PEOPLE took precedence for him over any of Israel's rites and rules and regulations which didn't have the power to save or heal ANYBODY of ANYTHING. Thus, TRUE freedom comes from knowing that like those Israelites, we TOO are loved FREELY and UNCONDITIONALLY with an EVERLASTING love, having been assured that nothing CAN or EVER WILL separate ANY of us from either God's presence or his love.

Friends, all this is to say that when traditions take precedence over the needs and concerns of people, when servile obedience to dead laws and empty precepts becomes more important than demonstrating how love and grace and forgiveness operate through them, then religion is diseased and does more harm than good. THIS was the religion Christ came to deliver his people from. As important as tradition may be at times, it can only remain healthy if it serves the Law of Love as embodied in the two GREATEST commandments laid down by Christ himself, the one which he said summed up the Law and the prophets: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind, and you shall love your neighbor as you love yourself. THAT becomes the test by which we must evaluate all our rules

and traditions- whether they help us to love our God and neighbor better, or whether they continue to build walls and foster divisions between us.

I repeat what I said earlier, that REAL Christians are genuine and sincere, who don't have to resort to fraud or pretense. They're humble enough to understand their own weaknesses and share them because they know they can't go it alone. REAL Christians are honest, patient, generous and kind who seek to emulate Jesus Christ in all their actions and won't hesitate to ask for forgiveness when they don't. As the old saying goes, "Tell me your faith and I might listen, but SHOW me your faith and I will FOLLOW!" The power of the gospel is revealed in all its fullness through HUMAN LIVES- and not through all the religious paraphernalia and bric-a-bracs we can buy at Christian bookstores. As easily as anyone can wave a flag, anyone can wear a cross. I recently saw a cross dangling around the neck of a young man who had been arrested for murder. The fact is that a REAL Christian is the one who LIVES the cross and has its truth imprinted deeply upon his or her heart- NOT the person who WEARS one over his heart merely to make a fashion statement!

I wish to conclude by saying that such controversies as flag burning will ALWAYS be with us. Five years after the flag-burning incident at the Republican National Convention, there was RENEWED outrage over the use of an American flag in a Chicago art exhibit. The artist had it placed on the floor and persons had to step on it to record their reactions as to how it should properly be displayed. Though I personally found the display offensive and would question whether it was art in the first place, my sentiments continue to be in agreement with that editorial from the Christian Science Monitor when it said, "Whether as American citizens or simply as lovers of freedom and equality, we cherish the Stars and Stripes. We cherish it, though, not as a piece of colorful fabric, but as a symbol of noble ideals about human beings and government, about 'life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.' You can't torch such ideals."

Similarly, people will CONTINUE to burn crosses or relegate it to no more than a shiny piece of custom jewelry but still the meaning and values behind them will long remain intact; their power and the significance will never diminish. Just as anyone can wave a flag, anyone can go to church or wear a cross or carry a Bible. But the TRUE Christian is someone who LIVES the cross, someone who allows its timeless ideals of love and humility and sacrifice to be imprinted upon his or her heart. Only such a person as THIS is a REAL Christian- someone who is "free indeed" and understanding of what TRUE FREEDOM is all about. Let us pray...

Gracious God, where patriotism may be "the last refuge of a scoundrel" as Samuel Johnson once famously said, so can our pretensions to faith. We can go through the motions of being a good Christian, pretending to love you and your church, when inwardly our thoughts and feelings remain far away. You alone can see our hearts and know what we truly are. Help us to love you with all our heart and all our soul and all our minds, and to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. Only then will we be a REAL Christian, someone who is a TRUE patriot. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.