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HOW TO BE
A PATRIOTIC
CHRISTIAN



LOVE OF COUNTRY
AS LOVE OF NEIGHBOR



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The title that I chose for this book announces my intention to offer counsel to Christian readers about how to be patriotic. I should make it clear at the outset, though, that this is not a how-to guide in the sense that it offers a list of steps that people should take if they want to succeed in some endeavor. I would not know how to craft such a list. The closest I can come to giving how-to advice about relating faith to patriotism is this: *keep wrestling with the questions*.

Questions like these: What does it mean to “love” our nation? If, as the Bible says, “the powers that be” are “ordained by God,” does that mean we should not criticize them? What about expressions of patriotism in our church worship? And what about using religious language on events celebrating national holidays? Is “civil religion” a bad thing? What does all of this mean in times like ours, when we are experiencing deep polarizations? These topics are what I will be exploring.

My own understanding of how to be patriotic as a Christian is a work in progress. I keep wrestling with the questions, and I hope I can offer guidance to others about how to persevere

in the wrestling. I know that there are people in present-day American society who see no need to do the wrestling. They can be found on both ends of the spectrum of views about patriotism. On the one end are the people who simply equate “God and country,” insisting that the true destiny of the United States is to live up to our calling as “a Christian nation.” On the other end are the folks who see all expression of patriotism as bad, with special disdain when love of country is connected to religious faith.

I don’t know how to get the folks on those opposite ends of that spectrum to listen to each other. But I take comfort in the fact that they do represent extreme ends of a spectrum and that there is considerable room between the extremes. I find it helpful to explore the spaces between the extremes, in the confidence that the Christian message gives us resources for that kind of exploring.

The problem these days, of course, is that the public debates about patriotism are often dominated by the extremes. This has been especially true in recent years when polarization seems to have become the rule of the day. The result is that many folks—especially many of the thoughtful Christians that I know—avoid talking about these things. When I have told people that I was writing about patriotism, I have often been urged to “be careful.” They worry that just by raising questions and exploring the middle spaces I will lose readers who want me to lean one way or another on the political spectrum.

I understand those concerns, but I am going to make the effort anyway. My hope is that I can use these pages as a safe place for focusing on basic Christian thoughts—drawing on

biblical teachings—about what it means to be citizens in the nation where the Lord has placed us.

My use of the image of wrestling to describe what I hope we can do together here may seem a bit too combative for this kind of discussion. But given the kind of angry combat going on in these partisan days, wrestling is actually fairly tame. As a sport—and I am not thinking here about the WWE variety!—people wrestle together to test their own strength and agility. Animosity and the desire to wound the other wrestler are out of place. What I have in mind here is some spiritual and theological wrestling: testing the strength and productivity of our understandings of the obligations of citizenship. We can even set the goal that Jacob had in mind when he wrestled with the angel in Genesis 32. He engaged in the match in order to be blessed.

In working for a mutual blessing here, I need to make it clear at the outset that I am writing as a citizen of a specific nation. I am writing about being patriotic with regard to the United States of America, the nation where the Lord has placed me. My discussion here will be about American patriotism. I'm not sure I could get very far in writing about a generic sort of patriotism. I believe it is necessary to think about where we specifically are called to be patriotic. In my scholarly life I have devoted much attention in my teaching and writing to major topics and themes in political thought: theories of government, the nature of political authority, questions of religious freedom, and so on. All of that has helped me in attaining some clarity about the background—the general framework—for what I will be exploring in these pages. Good books have been written, for example, about

political symbols that often have religious associations. In scholarly discussions of that sort, national flags are sometimes used as examples. I learn from those academic studies, but I find that when I start thinking about patriotism, my thoughts about flags quickly get quite personal. I reflect on how I feel and think about my country's flag, "the stars and the stripes."

ADJECTIVE AND NOUN

In choosing the two main words for my topic—*patriotic Christian*—I was very intentional in choosing *Christian* as the noun. That word identifies our fundamental identity as believers. Trusting in Christ because of what he has accomplished on our behalf is what defines us. The opening question and answer of the catechism that I learned as a child (the 1563 Heidelberg Catechism) puts it beautifully: the Christian's "only comfort in life and in death" is "that I am not my own, but belong—body and soul, in life and in death—to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ."¹ We have by God's grace been given a new "location," being "in Christ."

Of course, the global community of people who share that common identity of being "in Christ" also live in diverse national locations. And how we understand our Christian identity in relation to those diverse contexts will differ from nation to nation.

I was made aware of these differences in a conversation that I once had with a small group of Chinese seminary students. I have visited mainland China over two dozen times, often for two weeks at a time, meeting with church and government officials, preaching in local congregations, and

lecturing in the twenty-one theological seminaries of the officially approved Three-Self churches. In this particular small-group discussion the students wanted to talk about how Chinese Christians would understand how they relate to their government. One student said that as she understood the Bible's teaching, they had to "honor" the Chinese government, praying for God's blessings on the leaders. Another student strongly disagreed. He had been reading books by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Lutheran pastor who had been executed by the Nazis because of his Christian opposition to Hitler's evil designs. The Chinese government was not worthy of honor, he said, and true Christians must oppose the leadership, even if it means being put to death for doing so.

I was fascinated to hear their back-and-forth exchanges on this. The young woman was certainly right to cite the New Testament's mandate to honor those in authority over us. I will be discussing the importance of honoring government further on. The young man also was correct in seeing Bonhoeffer—one of my own heroes—as doing God's will in opposing Nazi ideology. I will also touch on the grounds for civil disobedience later in these pages.

What especially struck me in listening to these students talk about citizenship, though, was how real the possibility was for them of being persecuted for their convictions. They knew of actual cases of Christians being imprisoned or put under house arrest for their beliefs. Even if they were not ready to advocate for active opposition to their government, they were aware of the necessity of being very careful about what they said about the obligations of Christian citizenship. Exchanges about what it means to be patriotic for these Chinese Christian

students are more urgent—and carry far more risk with them—than class discussions in Southern California.

Obviously, there are things that we need to take into account wherever we find ourselves. While the Bible tells us to honor those who are in authority over us, we also know that there come times for Christians when to obey a government is to be unfaithful to the gospel. The apostles in the early church knew this. When the authorities in Jerusalem forbade them to continue preaching the gospel, they replied: “We must obey God rather than human beings!” (Acts 5:29).

The American setting does not typically force such stark choices on us. We have the liberty to engage in serious discussions about the obligations of Christian citizenship without fearing for our safety. But there are still significant issues to pursue together, especially since we have been facing new deep divisions within the Christian community. I have Christian friends on both sides of those divides, and while I may lean one way more than the other, I confess that I do not see myself as belonging comfortably on either of the “sides.” While I like to argue about the big topics, I also feel the need to get beyond the specific disagreements and find more basic principles and perspectives where Christians who take biblical authority seriously can find common ground.

I find focusing specifically on patriotism to be helpful in this regard. Even though I am acutely aware of the partisan passions, I am not convinced that our differences in dealing with political loyalties have to be as divisive as they are often thought to be. It is helpful, I think, to talk together about the proper ways to show love for our country. I also believe that

we can agree as American Christians that God has indeed blessed our nation in special ways throughout our history. At the same time, I think that we can agree—that we must agree—that many of us have benefited from these blessings at the expense of others who have suffered greatly in our nation’s history. This means that a legitimate love for America cannot be nurtured without also grieving and repenting for the things in our nation and its history that are unlovable.

That points to the space between the extreme ends of the spectrum. We have to keep two truths in mind: one, that it can be healthy to have a special kind of love for one’s country, and two, that we have to avoid the real temptation to keep that love from taking on a kind of absolute character.

THE HIGHEST THRONE

The Bible itself tells us to avoid the extremes. And this gives us space to find ways to love our country while also engaging in some inevitable lovers’ quarrels about our disagreements. It will not surprise me, though, if some readers disagree with me when I get into more detail regarding how I think we should go about loving our country. That is fine. The key is to wrestle together with important questions, even if we come up with different answers. What *is* for me nonnegotiable, though, is that we Christians must be clear that our primary allegiance, beyond what we owe the nation where we dwell as citizens, is to the kingdom of Jesus Christ. And the Bible tells us that when we come to witness the fullness of that kingdom in the heavenly regions, we will be joining our American voices with a much larger choir:

After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice:

“Salvation belongs to our God,
who sits on the throne,
and to the Lamb.” (Revelation 7:9-10)

This is a wonderful vision of a time when we will all celebrate the fact that Jesus’ throne has always been the highest seat of authority in the universe. And we will all have memories of what it was like to serve his eternal kingdom in the context of specific nations. For me, those will be American memories. So, recognizing that, I will tell some personal stories in these pages. I like an observation that the philosopher William James made in introducing his classic work *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. He informed his readers that he would be telling many individual stories from diverse spiritual autobiographies. When trying to understand religious experience, he wrote, “a large acquaintance with particulars often makes us wiser than the possession of abstract formulas.”²

James was not against abstract formulas, and neither am I. I won’t be able to avoid touching on a few of them in these pages. But I will also be offering some specific stories and examples about American patriotism, including my American patriotism. I hope that this will provide the kind of “large acquaintance with particulars” that will help to impart at

least a little wisdom about what it means to love one's country in a manner that is appropriate for followers of Jesus.

Again, paying attention to individual stories is especially important right now, given the contemporary mood in our culture, with the Christian community itself divided on these matters. While I have my own perspective on these issues, I have urged my fellow Christians to set aside the stereotypes and caricatures of those with whom we disagree and to work at genuinely listening to our individual testimonies about what we see as happening in our world. For Christians it is important to find ways of listening more carefully to each other in our faith journeys. I love the line from the Christmas carol "O Little Town of Bethlehem" about "the hopes and fears of all the years" being fulfilled in the coming of the Savior.³ Our attitude toward our country is very much a matter of hopes and fears, and I am convinced that exploring those hopes and fears in the light of biblical teaching can be a way of listening to each other more effectively.

PATRIOTIC TEARS

Some of my patriotic hopes and fears have come to the surface when I have shed tears in the presence of an American flag. One such experience happened on a visit to northern France two decades ago. My wife and I have on several occasions picked a European country in which to rent a car just to drive around for a week or so. We particularly enjoy seeing the countryside and visiting villages. This time we had decided to visit Normandy.

We had not planned to visit the site of the decisive World War II military invasion at Omaha Beach, but seeing signs

pointing us in that direction, we decided to make the visit. At a certain point in our walk from the parking area we came upon the large area where over nine thousand American military men and women are buried. Many of the long rows of crosses, with a few Stars of David scattered among them, displayed both an American and a French flag at each grave. The French flags had the word *Merci* on them, expressing gratitude from local residents for the American sacrifices. Witnessing that scene, I suddenly teared up and sobbed. That response just happened, catching me off guard.

The other event occurred at an evening concert at the Hollywood Bowl, three days after the horrible events of September 11, 2001. Hollywood Bowl concerts take place under an open sky. And when the orchestra starts playing the national anthem as the program is beginning, the audience stands up, hands on hearts, looking up at the American flag on a high pole, with spotlights illuminating it. That evening, seeing the gently waving flag lit up against the darkening sky, once again I teared up and began to sob.

I have clear memories of those two occasions because they are unique experiences for me. I can't recall other times when I experienced such strong emotions of patriotism. This is not to say that I haven't had positive thoughts and feelings about being an American. For the most part I have simply taken it for granted that as a citizen I owe affection and respect for my country. At sporting events, concerts, and civic gatherings, I would always join others by standing with my hand over my heart during the Pledge of Allegiance or the singing of our national anthem, "The Star-Spangled Banner." I have seen these public rituals as the kind of things that we did as good citizens.

I do need to acknowledge in this that there are Christians who have serious theological objections to many of these rituals. I have Mennonite friends, for example, who will not join in pledging allegiance to the American flag or in singing the national anthem. There is some careful and sincere theology in their refusal to participate in such rituals, a pattern of thinking—grounded in the Anabaptist tradition of the Protestant Reformation—that takes with utmost seriousness our obligation to put our ultimate allegiance and trust in Christ and his kingdom. This perspective is also closely linked to a refusal to serve in the military out of a commitment to a nonviolent way of life.

In my career as a theological ethicist, I have considered it a special assignment to engage in dialogue with persons advocating that theological perspective. I have learned much of great importance from that engagement, and I am well aware that those dialogue partners would have objections to many things that I am setting forth in these pages. My views on patriotism draw on the theological resources of my Reformed tradition, with help also from Lutheran and Catholic resources. But I do see the dangers of going too far in participating in the existing patterns of civic engagement, and I am deeply grateful for the ways my Anabaptist friends have done their part to keep me aware of those dangers.

PROTESTING YEARS

So why did I surprise myself when I sobbed in the French cemetery and at the Hollywood Bowl? During the 1960s, when I was in my twenties, I did my share of protesting, as a graduate student on secular university campuses, in civil

rights and antiwar demonstrations.

I'm not going to defend the specific views that I came to feel strongly about in those years—although basically I still hold to many of them. But I do want to support the more general case that when we come to disagree with our nation's policies or practices, it is not unpatriotic to give expression to our dissent.

My activism in those student days produced quite a bit of personal anxiety for me. This was a time when political disagreements were closely tied to intergenerational conflicts, particularly on issues relating to the Vietnam War. From many in the older generation we heard the angry rhetoric of the “America—love it or leave it!” variety. And within the evangelical community those attitudes sometimes took the form of charges that criticism of governmental policies was tantamount to a rejection of biblical teaching. As one close family member once put it to me when I said something critical about American military engagement in Vietnam: “We have to obey! Our leaders are ordained of God!”

But I was often disturbed by what I saw and heard in the protest movement as well. I was shocked on one occasion when, at an antiwar march in the nation's capital, some student activists tore down an American flag and hoisted a Vietcong flag in its place. I also found many radical slogans and chants at protest events to be disturbing.

I did feel more at home in civil rights activities. The biblical tones of Martin Luther King Jr.'s call to action were inspiring. “We shall overcome” drew on hopeful convictions about the cause of justice. Even here, though, many Christians found grounds for criticism of the civil rights cause. While Dr. King

was well meaning, some of them said, he—and those of us who supported him—was simply naive about being “used by the Communists.”

I look back on all of that as an important time of learning in my life, but it was difficult learning. It required struggling with lessons about faithful citizenship while also sensing the call to action.

One afternoon during my studies at the University of Chicago stands out for me in this regard. For three hours I participated in a doctoral seminar on some of the ancient Greek and Roman philosophers’ understanding of civic life. They placed an emphasis on the importance of such traits as moderation, a generous spirit, and patience in our lives as citizens. When the seminar ended, I attended an outdoor student protest against a decision by the university administration to cooperate with local draft boards in ways that many of us opposed. The angry speeches at that meeting were anything but moderate, generous, and patient.

Again, I understood the passion of the protest. I do not believe that good patriots should consistently avoid anger. It is impossible to read the Old Testament prophets, or the Psalms, without seeing anger as sometimes a godly response to various forms of oppression. In my involvement in campus protests, however, I did frequently sense that the angry denunciations went beyond criticisms of specific policies to the kinds of expressions of contempt that could have the effect of harming the relationships that the Greeks and Romans argued were essential to sustaining the bonds of citizenship.

To be sure, some of those ancient philosophers also advocated courage in supporting the cause of justice in civic

life. Aristotle, for one, argued that the virtue of justice could not be separated from the other virtues. I came away from that afternoon that juxtaposed scholarly reflection with political activism resolved to work at a perspective—theological as well as philosophical—that would encourage, when necessary, a loving active critique of specific governmental policies and practices. While my work during the subsequent years has often taken me into other important areas of concern, that resolve has always been present in some measure, to the point that I can say that I have been wrestling with this question throughout my career.

But patriotism is not just about our relationship to specific governmental policies and practices. It is about belonging to a community of citizens with whom we share our political allegiances—and even more important, our common humanness. Patriotism is in an important sense more about our participation in a nation than it is about loving a state. I'll give some attention to this distinction between state and nation further on.

LIKE A FAMILY

Connecting our patriotic hopes and fears to what we experience in family relations is a good place to start. The word *patriotism* is rooted in the Latin *pater*, for “father.” To be patriotic is to see one’s country as a fatherland. The gender issue is not important here: we can also think of our country as a motherland or, more broadly, as a homeland. All these terms denote the familial, the domestic.

With this in mind, we can note some of the aspects of our lives as members of families that are similar to aspects of our

lives as citizens. A key element in patriotism is affection. We often use domestic imagery in expressing patriotic sentiments, as in the Irving Berlin lyrics, “God bless America, land that I love, . . . my home sweet home.”⁴

It is helpful to pay some attention to the similarities between what we experience in our family relations and in our lives as citizens. Not only is there nothing wrong with having a special affection for one’s own parents, but it is a good and natural thing. The Sinai commandment about our relationship with our parents points us to the particularity of our individual family relationships: “Honor your father and your mother” (Exodus 20:12).

Recognizing the importance of loving our own family relationships should make us aware of the Christian importance of family, but that concern should also make us mindful of practical societal and political issues, such as elder care, medical services, birthing conditions, infant nutrition, childcare, maternity leaves, adoption—and much more. These are extensions of God’s simple command. We learn about the importance of families in God’s plan for human beings by starting off in “my family.”

There is no need here to get into specifics of a philosophy or theology of family relationships. My simple point is that we use familial language—fatherland, motherland, homeland—in speaking about our relationship to our own nation, which suggests that there are at least some illuminating parallels between belonging to a family and being the citizen of a nation.

When I was nine years old, I bought my first Mother’s Day card to give to my mother. I remember going to a local store

with weekly allowance money in my pocket and reading the cards to find an appropriate one. The one I chose said that my mother was “the world’s greatest mother.” I remember wondering if it was okay to say that to my mother since I was sure it was not literally true. I was the kind of nine-year-old Christian kid who worried a lot about God being angry with me for sins I committed, and I worried that I was telling a blatant lie in endorsing what that card said. Somewhere, I thought, there was a mother who had risked her life to rescue her child from a burning building—which would make her a greater mother than the one I had.

I decided, however, that the Lord would not be too upset with me for engaging in some exaggeration on Mother’s Day. Looking back on that message to my mother, I see it as an expression of what I would now label as “hyperbolic affection.” If I tell my wife, “I love you more than anything!” I am not really saying that she is more important to me than the love of Jesus.

The effusive statements that we make in talking to people whom we love also show up in expressions of patriotic sentiment. And one could argue that in principle there is nothing really wrong with that. So, maybe saying that our nation is “the greatest nation” is as harmless as my Mother’s Day message to my mother.

There is a problem with the patriotic version though. My mother would not have been offended to find out that a twelve-year-old down the street told her mother that *she* was the greatest mother in the world. What was most important to my mother was how I cared about her. She did not see the mother down the street as a competitor for her own children’s loyalty.

I'll put it bluntly: my mother commanded no armies. She did not use guns and bombs to defend her right to be called the best mother in the world. Nations are obviously different in this regard. They go to war with each other. And sometimes they make decisions about such matters that some citizens call into question, with the result that the questioners are accused by their fellow citizens of being unpatriotic.

Of course, in their own way families do sometimes make war on each other. Once I gave a public talk about these things, and a woman came up to me afterward to point out that I should be a little more careful about using the analogy to a family. She had suffered much in her family upbringing, she said. Among other things, she had been abused by her father, and her mother had refused to intervene. Families, as well as nations, can be dysfunctional, the woman said.

Her word of caution was important, and it points to yet another way that nations can be like families. A country doesn't just go wrong in relations with other countries. It can go wrong internally. It can be dysfunctional. Here too, then, we have to deal with whether it is always unpatriotic to criticize one's nation. It is certainly the case that genuinely loving our family members often requires that we talk to each other about where we disagree—in loving ways, it is to be hoped. To be genuinely loving in our families does not mean that there won't be deep hurts and frustrations. It just means that we are dedicated to trying to make things better rather than remaining stuck in the hurting places—or thinking that we can simply go back to what we think of as better days. The same would also seem to hold for our lives as citizens. James Baldwin put it well: "I love America more than any other

country in the world and, exactly for this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually.”⁵

A UNIQUE NATION?

We have to dig in a little further here. Scholars have given a lot of attention to what they refer to as “*American exceptionalism*.” This is the idea that the United States has a unique place among the nations of the earth. In our national culture this gets expressed by talk about our country being a “great nation” with a “special destiny.”

My wife and I had a chance to think much about this issue when we encountered some anti-American sentiments while we lived for two years in Canada during my graduate school days. The negative comments about the United States came from good friends, and none of it was mean-spirited. They complained about excessive American influence on the television programs and movies that their kids watched, the impact of Washington policies on the Canadian economy, too much “American content” in classrooms and churches, and the attitudes of some visitors from the United States who were condescending about Canadian culture.

Having heard those complaints often enough, we began to see that our friends had a point. America was for them like an intimidating neighbor who was insensitive to the ways his actions affected the family next door. At the same time, however, there was affection, which was expressed in dramatic ways when President Kennedy was assassinated. Our Canadian friends not only expressed sympathy for us for our loss as American citizens, but they genuinely grieved in their own souls. They had clearly been inspired by our young

president for his visionary leadership that extended beyond his own nation's borders. In short, they were ambivalent about their neighbor to the south: the real resentments were undergirded by respect for significant leadership of the United States among the nations.

I sense some of that kind of ambivalence in my own soul. I worry about some of our prideful boasts about “our great nation.” But I also recognize some signs of greatness in the United States. Many of my own criticisms of my country stem from my high expectations regarding what we could accomplish with our national gifts.

“To whom much has been given, much will be required” was frequently quoted when I was growing up—my parents used it to chasten me when my report card was not up to their expectations, and schoolteachers would use it in periodic motivational talks. It was only when I grew older that I realized that it was more than a piece of popular wisdom; the thought comes from Jesus himself, in Luke 12:48 (NRSV).

The Lord's words apply to nations as well as individuals. Divine providence is surrounded in mystery, but it is possible to discern in a nation's history something of the ways in which God both blesses and tests a specific national people. God is ultimately the source of what “has been given” to a nation, and he is also the one to whom “much will be required” from the nation. There are always two questions, then, that Christians must ask in assessing a nation's degree of “greatness.” How much has the nation been given? And what has it done with what it has received?

I believe that the United States has been greatly blessed among the nations. I know that some Christians worry about

saying that kind of thing, but it seems obviously true to me. I am writing this while reading reports about refugees from other nations—Haiti and Afghanistan, for example—eager to be allowed to enter the United States. They rightly see our country as a place of opportunity, politically as well as materially. And they are right. It is undeniable that this is at least one of the more “blessed” nations.

But is the United States uniquely blessed? There is a history of seeing our country as a special “chosen nation.” The Bible gives that title, of course, to ancient Israel. Comparing America to Israel has been common from the start, beginning with John Winthrop’s much-cited sermon, preached shipboard before landing in the Massachusetts Bay, about founding a shining “City on the Hill.” The Puritan settlers were sometimes depicted as having the right as God’s special people to claim the “Promised Land” that was then occupied by the native “Canaanites.”

We have to be clear here on one crucial point of theology. In the Bible it is the people of Israel who are seen by God as “the holy nation.” The only time that phrase is used to refer to any other collective entity is in the New Testament, in the apostle Peter’s first epistle. There Peter teaches that language applied in the past exclusively to the Jewish people is now extended to the Christian church, composed of both Jews and Gentiles:

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a *holy nation*, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God. (1 Peter 2:9-10, emphasis added)

We must dig in a little further here. Scholars have given a lot of attention to what they refer to as American exceptionalism. This is the idea that the United States has a unique place among the nations of the earth. In our national culture this gets expressed by talk about our country being a “great nation” with a “special destiny.”

The Bible takes “holy nation” status seriously, and it is significant that the only peoples who qualify for this status are Old Testament Israel and the New Testament church. No other nation qualifies. And, importantly, the New Testament sees the church as a multinational body. This is movingly expressed in the hymn to the Lamb in Revelation 5:

“You are worthy to take the scroll
and to open its seals,
because you were slain,
and with your blood you purchased for God
persons from every tribe and language and people
and nation.
You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to
serve our God,
and they will reign on the earth.” (Revelation 5:9-10)

“You have *made* them to be a kingdom.” This is about our authentic Christian identity. Yes, we are citizens of particular nations, but through the atoning work of Christ we have been given a deeper identity: citizens of a kingdom with people from other tribes and nations. When I attended church services in Canada, and when I met with theological students in China, I was bonding with “my people.” Jesus made us to be citizens together in his kingdom—his “holy nation.” To be

sure, as I will be reminding us again and again in these pages, we also hold citizenship in different earthly nations, and God calls us to take those identities seriously. But they do not define us at the center of our redeemed natures. Belonging to the people of the Lamb is the true exceptionalism!

None of this, though, should keep us from recognizing the workings of providence in the specific history of the United States. Martin Luther King Jr. recognized this. In his powerful “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” he argued that because our nation’s founding vision made it clear that “the goal of America is freedom,” the calls for justice in present-day life are grounded in “the sacred heritage of our nation and the eternal will of God.”⁶ That can’t be said of many other countries although the United States is not unique in this regard. But Dr. King was right in insisting that we Americans do possess a “sacred heritage” that does bless us in special ways. To recognize this is not to engage in proud boasting about our greatness. Rather, it commits us to an active doing of God’s will in our roles as citizens.

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