

EXCERPT



## ***How to Be a Patriotic Christian*** Love of Country as Love of Neighbor

July 19, 2022 | \$17, 160 pages, paperback | 978-1-5140-0402-9

What does it mean to love our country? Navigating between the extremes of Christian nationalism and disengagement, Richard Mouw sees healthy patriotism as love of country in the context of Christian love of neighbor. Calling us to build a country where all people can thrive in peace, this guide helps us pave the way toward liberty and justice for all.

## Keep Wrestling with the Questions

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 at 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.

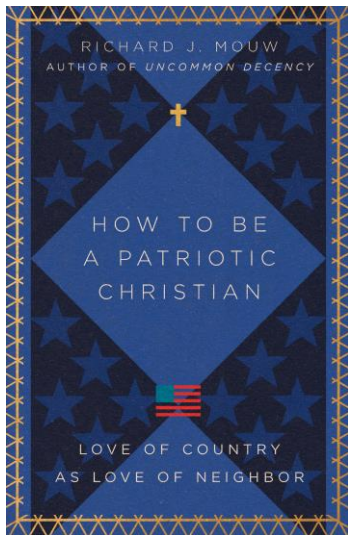


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*"Rich Mouw's reflection on Christian faith, patriotism, and citizenship is essential reading for our times from one of the wisest and kindest voices around."*

—**John Inazu**, Sally D. Danforth Distinguished Professor of Law and Religion at Washington University in St. Louis

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.

#### **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.

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.<sup>3</sup> 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.

—Adapted from Chapter One, "Wrestling Together"



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"At a time of sharp polarities and confrontational discourse, Richard Mouw's, *How to Be a Patriotic Christian* could not be more timely. Drawing on his profound theological scholarship and his vibrant evangelical faith, he offers readers, in a conversational and respectful tone, a thoroughly balanced and wise discussion of how as believers we can both love our country as our home and, at the same time, be committed to the kingdom of God that embraces all nations and peoples. This is pastoral theology at its best."

—Donald Senior, CP, president emeritus of Catholic Theological Union, Chicago

## **Philosopher, Scholar, and Author**

"I am comforted by the fact that civil religion is still with us. . . . Daily prayers are offered at the opening of sessions of the US Senate. We still sing about sacred matters at civic gatherings. School children pledge allegiance to a nation 'under God.' I certainly wish for more to be said in those contexts than the guidelines regulating the public use of religious concepts will allow, but I do not want less. For those of us who both fear God and love our country, not everything associated with generic 'God and country' themes can be seen as misguided." —Richard Mouw, from *How to Be a Patriotic Christian*

**Richard Mouw** is a senior research fellow at the Henry Institute for the Study of Religion and Politics at Calvin University. Dr. Mouw is continuing his research in Christian political thought, as well as working with faculty and students on special projects and helping to organize conferences and symposia.

He previously served as the president of Fuller Theological Seminary (1993–2013) and directed their Institute of Faith and Public Life (2013–2020). His initial career in academia began at Calvin College, where he taught philosophy from 1968 to 1985.

Dr. Mouw served for many years as a panelist for the Washington Post's online forum "On Faith." In 2007, Princeton Theological Seminary awarded him the Abraham Kuyper Prize for Excellence in Reformed Theology and Public Life. He is the author of over twenty books, including *Uncommon Decency*, *Adventures in Evangelical Civility*, *Restless Faith*, and *All That God Cares About*.



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