

One Nation Under God

June 30, 2011

When American Christians pledge allegiance to their nation and its flag—sometimes in worship services—does that reflect narrow nationalism or proper patriotism? Some Baptists believe it all hinges on how they interpret “one nation under God.”

Nationalism, by context and common usage, has come to mean a narrow, self-justifying jingoism,” said [James Dunn](#), resident professor of Christianity and public policy at the Wake Forest University School of Divinity. “Patriotism can be a healthy appreciation for the values, history, people and heroes of a particular country.”

Nationalists see their country as exceptional—the one and only nation under God’s exclusive protection and superior to all others. And that’s a position contrary to the biblical understanding of God as greater than any single nation or people, he noted.

“As I read it, the Scripture says all nations are under God, or at least they should be seen as so,” Dunn said.

But Rob James, retired professor of religion at the University of Richmond and chair of the [Baptist General Association of Virginia](#) religious liberty committee, believes the phrase “one nation under God” rightly expresses an important principle—God must be valued more than one’s country.

“As Christians, our worship and allegiance belongs to God, who is revealed to us in Christ. Love of one’s nation cannot take more than second place,” James said. “To give it higher place is to violate the first commandment.”

Church historian Jim Spivey agreed.

“I think God has wired all people to have an innate love of country—a deep and abiding affinity for kinsmen and neighbors of common heritage and like values. It is healthy and right for Americans to love America, to think of it as a great nation, and to be proud of its stand for liberty and equal opportunity. It is natural for citizens of any nation to feel this way as long as their homeland stands for values that are honorable and just,” said Spivey, senior fellow and professor of church history at the [B.H. Carroll Theological Institute](#).

“However, it becomes idolatry when people take their eyes off the very God who has blessed them and has enabled their nation to become great, when they wrap the Bible in the American flag and when their pursuit of the American dream compromises the basic principles of the kingdom of God. In short, it becomes idolatry when people allow any form of civil religion to replace heartfelt devotion to God.”

Two theological principles should inform a Christian’s attitude toward his or her nation—creation and incarnation, Dunn explained.

Christians should recognize the image of God in every human being and realize that common connection to the Creator “ought to trump all other distinctions,” including those of nationality, he said.

At the same time, belief that God entered human history in the person of Jesus Christ “blesses the idea of being in a particular place and part of a particular nation,” he added.

Love for country characterizes both patriotism and nationalism, and some people use the terms interchangeably. But nationalism moves into the realm of extreme super-patriotism, said Brent Walker, executive director of the [Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty](#).

“The patriot says: ‘I love my country, right or wrong. And I want to try to make it better.’ The nationalist says: ‘I love my country. It cannot be

wrong,'" Walker said.

Christians must hold in tension the kind of allegiance to country that good citizenship requires and the ultimate allegiance due to God alone, he said.

"My position is that patriotism and piety are both good things, but they are not the same thing," Walker said. "Allegiance to Caesar always must be subservient to our allegiance to God."

When love for country takes the place of utmost devotion that rightly belongs only to God, it becomes "sinful and idolatrous," Walker said.

But sometimes Christians can lapse into idolatrous attitudes toward their country without even realizing it.

"There is a clear, definitive line that distinguishes healthy devotion from idolatry. But this line is hard to recognize, especially if we are not looking for it," said Spivey, former assistant chief of chaplains of the U.S. Army, who retired as a brigadier general after more than 30 years military service.

"Unfortunately, even people of conscience who would never knowingly cross that line sometimes are lured across by a gradual, almost imperceptible, and seductive process."

Even people who in principle recognize the importance of seeing every person as made in God's image and guarding the religious liberty rights of all people can lapse into viewing their own country and kindred as superior to others, Dunn added.

"We all have a smidgen of the nationalist in us," he acknowledged. "The idolatry of nationalism is one of those darling sins we can slide into without bad intentions. In fact, it's almost accidental and often even with good motives."

