

Editorial: Freedoms: Be careful what you celebrate

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Our most important freedoms as Americans are protected by the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which reads, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.”

It’s noteworthy that the Bill of Rights begins with protecting religion, speech, press, assembly and petition. Of all the rights afforded the people of the United States, these were at the top of the list.

It’s also noteworthy that the rights protected by the First Amendment are the same rights we seem most often to claim are under attack. All year, we fight for these freedoms. Then on July 4, we break from the fight to celebrate all the freedoms we have.

Do we know what freedoms we are celebrating?

I wonder if we really know what we are celebrating.

As citizens and residents of the United States, do we really know and understand the [Constitution of the United States](#)? I challenge us as citizens to become more familiar with this foundational document.

I challenge Christian citizens not only to become more familiar with the Constitution but also to become clear about just what freedom we are

celebrating.

Consider this question: To be a good Christian, do I have to stand for the national anthem, enthusiastically sing patriotic songs in a worship service, or loudly defend the Second Amendment?

If I am any less of a Christian for not doing any one of these things, or a combination, then I have to wonder how much being a Christian depends on being a good citizen or how much being a good citizen depends on being a Christian.

When religion becomes civil

In Denmark during the 18th and early 19th centuries, a person had to be a member of the Danish Lutheran Church to be a citizen of Denmark, and a person had to be a citizen of Denmark to conduct business. As a result, many Danish Christians followed the rules outwardly, paying their dues to the state church on Sunday mornings, while following their hearts inwardly by participating in unofficial Christian gatherings on Sunday evenings.

Baptist Christians, among others, came to the New World in the hopes of establishing societies free of state-regulated religion. The First Amendment was written and ratified in part to provide such freedom.

Despite freedom from state establishment of religion being codified into law, Christianity became the unofficial religion of the United States. For example, it became expected that a man would join a particular Christian church to improve his standing in town, to improve his business prospects, or even to secure his election to political office.

Being a member of the wrong church or wrong religion doomed all three prospects.

Robert Bellah described such use of religion as “[civil religion](#),” borrowing the phrase from Rousseau, a French philosopher writing in the 18th century during the time the American founders were hard at work forming their thoughts about “a more perfect Union.”

Bellah described how the religion of the church became the religion of American society. Not being antagonistic toward the church, American civil religion “borrowed selectively from the religious tradition in such a way that the average American saw no conflict between the two. In this way, the civil religion was able to build up without any bitter struggle with the church powerful symbols of national solidarity and to mobilize deep levels of personal motivation for the attainment of national goals.”

Are you wary of civil religion?

A clear example of Bellah’s claim was on full display in Vice President [Mike Pence’s speech](#) to the Southern Baptist Convention annual meeting in June 2018. Pence began his speech by establishing his connection to those gathered, appealing to their shared faith—particularly their shared conversion experience—by quoting John 3:16 and referring to walking “the sawdust trail.”

After listing Trump administration successes, Pence said, “Today, we only ask the men and women of this convention to continue in your calling with renewed energy” because “your voice, your compassion, your values, and your ministries are more needed than ever before.”

Pence continued, “[T]he most important work in America doesn’t happen in the White House or anywhere in Washington, D.C. for that matter. We know the most meaningful work, the most transformative work happens where you live, where your ministries impact: in the hearts and minds of the American people.”

The words sound good on the surface but ought to give pause to listening ears. Without critiquing Pence's religious faith, simply examine his words in light of the expressed goal of his entire speech. Pence's tactic is clear: connect with the people and leverage that connection for government ends. Frankly, we expect politicians to do this and elect them for their ability to do so.

Christians should be wary, however, when a government seeks to connect our spiritual freedom in Christ with religious freedom in service of government ends.

Relying on religious freedom proves spiritual freedom is weak

American Christians have often conflated religious freedom as guaranteed by the First Amendment with spiritual freedom guaranteed by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Military salutes and the singing of the national anthem during Christian worship services are just two examples of how the two freedoms have been conjoined. If you don't support our troops or honor our flag the way we do, we suspect something is wrong with your soul.

When we behave like this in our worship services, are we unwittingly serving the state's interests?

Worse, are we knowingly serving the state's interest?

Worse still, are we suggesting our freedom in Christ, secured by the Lord of all creation, somehow needs religious freedom defended by manmade laws?

We must remember Jesus instructed us to give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's ([Matt. 22:21](#)). Another way of stating Jesus'

instruction is, "Do not give to Caesar what is God's."

We must recognize the difference between freedom under human law and freedom in Christ. We must never seek to secure our spiritual freedom with human freedoms.

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