

History and Rightly Ordered Patriotism

The Christian Virtue of Love for Country

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As a seminary professor, I have found that most people who enroll in a Master of Divinity program have a more complicated relationship with history than they do with biblical studies, systematic theology, or even Christian philosophy. Keeping in mind that there are exceptions to every rule, in general, most seminary students find history engaging but also see history as secondary in importance to biblical studies and theology. I want to stress that this is not a criticism of seminary students. It is entirely rational to expect that most aspiring church leaders, missionaries, counselors, and academics would embark on graduate studies in seminary to focus on Bible and theology. At times, I have answered honest students who have asked me good faith questions as to why they are required to take history courses as part of a theological education. I always tell students that history is an indispensable discipline for seminary training. While the Bible is our sole authority in faith and practice and acknowledging that theology is the study of the doctrines revealed to us in the Bible, history is the evidence-based analysis of how persons over time have thought and acted in the world God made. Scripture, theology, and history are bridged by the truths divinely revealed and then applied in space and time. The doctrine of God, the doctrine of Christ, the doctrine of Scripture, the

doctrine of salvation, and the doctrine of humanity—these doctrines are all on display in real time and in concrete terms in the lives and ideas of persons in the progression of generations since the dawn of Creation. Theology and history are inseparable from one another. To understand God and humanity aright, we must look to Scripture and theology. But we cannot fully know God or human nature without direct reference to history. History validates all that God has revealed to humanity.

In creating persons in His image, God created the nations. We can see in history how the nation-state developed over vast stretches of time from the fall of the Roman Empire to the rise of the European kings and the decline of the papacy in the late Middle Ages; from the discovery of America and the establishment of global empires to the Renaissance and the Reformation, in which national identity began to emerge; from the Treaty of Westphalia ending the Thirty Years' War in 1648, laying the political and religious basis for the nation-state to American independence confirmed between 1776 and 1783. History demonstrates how the American nation took shape as an emerging concept long before it actually came to be, and it shows us our place in the development of our nation since its inception. History is thus absolutely necessary for us to grasp what it means to love our nation in our time. Practical and moral historical thinking is equally necessary if we are to understand healthy patriotism on the basis of history. Understanding patriotism, then, must be conducted in concrete terms: in real lives in real time in real places. We cannot understand patriotism in merely abstract, theoretical terms.

The Lord blessed me with a grandfather who modeled a life that represented an impeccably well-ordered hierarchy of loves. Jasper N. Dorsey (1913–1990), whom we all called “Papa,” was a devoted husband, father, grandfather, friend, churchman, patriot, and public servant. He was the most honorable man I have ever known. What made him so was the way he prioritized the things he loved in word, deed, and precept. The effects of his well-ordered life were seen in his irrepressible optimism, *joie de vivre*, and sense of humor all mixed with an uncompromising demand for excellence which he made of himself and of those in his charge.¹ He serves as an example of a real person with a

¹ I have adapted this article from a piece I wrote for *Modern Reformation* with the kind permission of the editors. See

nature like ours who demonstrated how to rightly balance the love of two countries, one in the already and the other in the not-yet. Papa knew that the secret to balancing love of God with love of country was no secret but was bound up in the two most simple and significant divine commandments that the Lord Jesus taught us in Mark 12:29–31. He faithfully aspired to love the Lord with all his heart, soul, and might and doing that, to love his neighbor as he loved himself.

In his fruitful life, Papa enjoyed a profoundly happy fifty-one-year marriage to my grandmother, raised two children, served his country in the Army during World War II, and rose in the ranks of Southern Bell Telephone and Telegraph Company from climbing telephone poles as a lineman to serving as CEO of all operations in Georgia between 1936 and 1978. Almost from the moment of his graduation from the University of Georgia in 1936, he was dedicated to the advancement of education for young Georgians as citizens, and their development as leaders in business, politics, the military, churches, schools, and media. He was an elder in the Presbyterian church and after he retired from the phone company in 1978, he wrote a weekly syndicated column which appeared in over forty newspapers all over Georgia. He wrote until just weeks before he died in 1990.

Along with his successes, Papa suffered more than his share of tribulations. He and my grandmother lost two children—one son who was stillborn, and another who was killed in a tragic car accident while driving home from college at the young age of twenty-one. My Uncle Tucker died before I was born, but my mother always said that her parents were never the same after suffering the loss of their youngest child. Toward the end of his life, Papa faithfully cared for my grandmother during a ten-year debilitating illness, which ended in her death. After she died, my grandfather courageously faced the grief of loneliness after losing her along with the excruciating pain of bone cancer, which finally took his life in August of 1990. Still, my experience with both grandparents was of two people who understood, more than most, the great truth that God is the giver of every good and perfect gift, and the greatest

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gifts God gives always come in the context of love and redemption. Their lives remain a testimony to the effects that the fruit of the Spirit, borne in ordinary lives, can have on others both near and far in proximity for the glory of God.



Papa was my teacher in what it means to be a conservative.² Conservatism is a disposition, a worldview, a perspective on God, reality, change, and human relations. Contrary to how the term is usually used in contemporary discourse, conservatism precedes politics. As a conservative in the pre-political and dispositional sense of the word, I am persuaded that the best way to argue a point is to rely on concrete examples rather than on abstractions. That is why I bring up my grandfather in addressing the issue of balancing loyalty to God with loyalty to country. Too often we moderns tend to make abstractions of our love of God and love of country. God and country are not merely expressions with no viable substance, and love for God and country are not just sentiments fit either for kitschy patriotic church services or riots at the U. S. Capitol. Both love of God and love of country involve actual and active love of real persons. God, as the ground of all being, is the source of both our existence and of our salvation. We love him because he made us, and he saved us. We owe him our whole devotion because of who he is as the sovereign Lord of Creation and as the divine/human savior of his elect. We were created to worship him and to

² My grandfather, Jasper N. Dorsey, shortly after being commissioned a 2LT in 1937. Note his 2nd Infantry Division insignia on his left shoulder. Photo is the property of the author.

enjoy him in our love for him, expressed in contexts of gratitude, obedience, and suffering. We learn how to love the Lord in everyday experience. We have instruction on how to love the Lord in the preaching and teaching of the Bible in the local church and through spiritual disciplines like meditation on the Bible, prayer, giving, and serving. An orthodox and thoroughgoing ecclesiology will bear fruit in individual Christians of a congregation who love the Lord by walking with Him and trusting Him each day.

We love the United States of America, a real country made up of real people with whom we interact each day in the most ordinary of ways. We have a duty toward our fellow citizens in the present, and history shows how Americans have had success and failure in performing their duties to their fellow citizens. There is much talk these days about “our democracy,” but what do people mean when they use that term? The term is not much more than an abstraction, and even if it were defined with precision, Americans would divide up into camps based on their own ways of defining “democracy.” The best way of coming to grips with who we are as Americans is to look to our history. American history is the experience of past generations, so it is concrete and not abstract.

Good historical thinking, predicated on sound methods and virtue, fosters humility before history. Historical thinking and American history should be taught in schools to make good citizens. Writing in 1953, the American historian Daniel Boorstin saw consensus as the way to make sense of America’s past. There were no great political philosophers like Locke or Montesquieu among the founders. The American experiment was crafted to suit the American context, and the nation grew into the constitutional order it envisioned in 1787. Americans have always been people of practicality, not theory. And Americans have always agreed on the ideals articulated in the founding documents. “The proper role of the citizen and the statesman here is one of conservation and reform rather than invention,” Boorstin argued. “He is free to occupy himself with the means of improving his society; for there is relatively little disagreement to ends.”³ We do not have to invent a democratic theory or a national identity. Our national identity has always been there, and its devel-

³ Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Genius of American Politics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1953), 181.

opment can be traced in history.

Cicero said over two thousand years ago that our love for our country is an ordered extension of our love for our families. “Even in our social relations some duties are more important than others,” Cicero wrote. “We are beholden first to the immortal gods, next to our country, then to our parents, and finally, to the rest of men in a descending order.”⁴ Cicero’s order of loves is different than what I will propose, but the point is that our loves must be rightly ordered.

Our love for our country begins with love and loyalty to those closest to us: the members of our households. As children we learn to honor our fathers and mothers. Our parents and grandparents were not equal in rank to my brother and me. We did not have the freedom to disobey their rules and expect to enjoy peace and flourishing in our family. If we wanted to grow and flourish, we as children had to learn to sacrifice our own interests and desires and submit to our elders. This is God’s pattern for how we put aside childish things and grow into maturity. Furthermore, I was the youngest child, and I had to learn by experience that there were certain privileges my brother enjoyed that came with his seniority. I also learned that my brother had a special responsibility to me as the younger brother. We learn how to love others by practicing self-denial in real time from our earliest childhood. We all learn that it is sometimes hard to respect and follow authority. We learn how to live under authority in the family, and we learn our rightful place in the family hierarchy, sometimes the hard way. We also come to know the stories about our ancestors when we are children, and those traits they had which are worthy of emulation and those which are not. We come to understand that those who went before us made us who we are. As we grow, we learn how to live with people who are not like us, who do not always agree with us, who do not see the world as we do, but with whom we can nonetheless enjoy friendship and cooperation. These are all part of God’s moral order, which is no less real than the physical order and structure of the world He made.

⁴ Marcus Tullius Cicero, *On Moral Duties*, in *The Basic Works of Cicero*, ed. Moses Hadas (New York: Modern Library, 1951), 59–60.

Our love for our own people starts with the those in our families and extends out to those in our local associations, our towns, counties, and cities, to our states, and finally to our country. When we see the United States flag, we know that it is not just a piece of fabric, nor does it stand for some abstract nationalistic trope. The flag is a sign. It represents the people that make up the nation—those who are dead, those who are living, and those who are yet to be born. When we think of “the American people” we include our ancestors, actual people who stewarded our country and handed it down to us as an inheritance. We consider that it is our responsibility as the living to take care of that inheritance and prepare to hand it down to our children and grandchildren. The category of “the American people” starts with the people I actually see in the kitchen as I make coffee in the morning and extends outward in proximity as I go about my day. Thus, the abstract expression of “the American people” becomes concrete from the perspective of proximity. The people I live with in my home, church, school, ball league, and town are *my* people. I know my people well because I see them, work and play with them, suffer together with them, rejoice with them, teach them, am taught by them, forgive them, and seek forgiveness from them in small and great ways every day of my life. So too are our loves ordered starting with God, who is one in three persons and as real as the air I breathe. My country consists of real persons of whom I am, and who are as real as I am. We can think of a right ordering of love in terms of the old Sunday school acrostic, J-O-Y—Jesus first, others second, you last. Such an ordering of loves is the basis for patriotism. Patriotism is a rightly ordered love of country that comes from gratitude and joy in the good gifts God has freely given by his grace. As Papa used to say, rightly ordering our loves is one of those things in life that “ain’t hard; it just ain’t easy.”

There is a popular idea that America is God’s chosen nation, superior in rank to inferior peoples, and commissioned by God to act on inferior peoples as it will—this is one kind of American nationalism. I have referred to this idea as an expression of closed American exceptionalism.⁵ It is not the only expression of American nationalism, nor is it unique to Americans. Germans, Russians, French, English, Italians, Greeks, Turks, Armenians, Japanese, and

⁵ See John D. Wilsey, *American Exceptionalism and Civil Religion: Reassessing the History of an Idea* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2015).

Chinese have all had similar expressions in their nationalities over the generations, as have the many tribes and nations of indigenous peoples in the Americas and Africa. Why? Because human nature is sinful and seeks to set the self as the final arbiter of that which is right and true. It is human nature to exalt the self and debase others. Americans have done it, as has every society since Cain. Closed exceptionalism amounts to national idolatry, and Americans no more invented idol worship than they invented closed exceptionalism.

Closed exceptionalism must be sharply contrasted with what I have called open exceptionalism. In open exceptionalism, we Americans gratefully recognize that ours is a great country because of its unique contributions to human freedom, one of the most profound aspirations of creatures made in God's image. The history of the United States is a story of the advancement of freedom, not only within our own borders but around the world. No other country has done more for the advancement of human freedom than the United States since 1776. Such an acknowledgement does not mean that we should equate America with ancient Israel, nor does it suggest that God has specially chosen America over other nations to do His will. It does mean, despite its failures in its national lifespan, that America has been a spectacular blessing to the world. We can be grateful to God for our country, cherish it, and strive to faithfully steward this gift to prepare it for the coming generations. Cicero wrote, "if . . . we are debtors, and our duty is not to bestow but to requite a favor, it behooves us to give the greater diligence; for no duty is more imperative than gratitude."⁶

Closed exceptionalism is problematic for its chauvinism and appropriation of theological categories reserved for the church, like chosenness, mission, and regeneration. Like most problematic ideas, however, closed exceptionalism is rarely as simple and recognizable as, say, bowing down in worship to the American flag. Sin usually mixes some truth with error, as we plainly see in the first sin of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3. For this reason, guarding against making the nation into an idol entails deep knowledge of and sincere submission to the Bible. If we allow ourselves to be ignorant of what the Bible says about God and His will for His creatures, then the Bible can become

⁶ Cicero, *On Moral Duties*, 21.

nothing more than a symbol to us, a talisman we carry into the public square. Ignorance of the Bible can easily lead to idolatry because it renders us unable to extract the precious from the vile, as God exhorted the prophet Jeremiah (Jer 15:19). When we are ignorant of God's Word, we reject knowledge and the moral correction which attends it, making us stupid as Solomon admonished in Proverbs 12:1. Ignorance and stupidity lead directly to idolatry, and as we wallow in our stupidity, we are like the idolater of Isaiah 44:20 who "cannot deliver himself, nor say, 'Is there not a lie in my right hand?'"

Christians come to know God through consistent meditation on Scripture. True knowledge of God necessarily results in love and submission to Him. Such love and submission result in the application of the virtues in dealing with thorny problems that attend American nationality. Closed exceptionalism is one of those problems—the making of America into an idol. We have had hosts of other historical problems: slavery and Jim Crow, unjust territorial expansion, injurious treatment of immigrants, profligate waste of material resources, illusions of national innocence and grandeur, glorification of sexual deviance, abortion, and many other sins of collective commission and omission. What are we to do with these? Does not the "Redeemer Nation" itself need to be redeemed?

We are often told that America is unworthy of the faith our ancestors placed in it, and since we are more enlightened than they, we are in a better position, even morally obligated, to be fundamentally skeptical of the American project and are to refrain from patriotic expression in the interest of faithful Christian testimony. Nonsense. This is simply throwing out the baby with the bathwater. Such an attitude is borne out of an adolescent and irrational yearning for simple explanations of human nature. It is a form of self-exaltation. The proper response for American Christians is to patriotically embrace open exceptionalism and reject closed exceptionalism.

We see in human nature a tension between two opposing realities. On the one hand, we are made in the image of God. God made persons "a little lower than the angels" and crowned humankind "with glory and majesty" as David wrote in Psalm 8. At the same time, "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23) and our "sins have hidden His face . . . so that

He does not hear" (Isa 59:2). We bear unspeakably profound dignity because God made us in His image, but we also bear an unanswerable weight of guilt and shame because of our sin for which only God can make atonement. He has made atonement for sin through Jesus Christ, but even the reality that Christ's work of atonement is finished does not erase the tension between human dignity and human fallibility in time and space. The immature mind cannot bear to find a way to hold two opposing realities in tension together, but the mature mind understands that great exemplars of justice and wisdom this side of the Incarnation can be great sinners, and yet can still be worthy of emulation. Immaturity fosters an imagination that can only see unending conflict between purity and stain, with no possibility of redemption. Wisdom discerns how best to hold dignity and fallibility in tension, and when to celebrate a noteworthy person and why. Much of the rejection of rightly ordered patriotism in our day is childish. Since immaturity and childishness naturally exalt the self at the expense of others in a zero-sum equation, the immature and infantile mind is always in search of ways to cancel perceived threats to their own idolatrous illusions of grandeur. The wisdom and charity of a fully formed conscience understands the self as the chief of sinners as the Apostle Paul did (1 Tim 1:15). The virtuous search for truth in history by the wise yields deeper wisdom still.

Every American who has ever lived has had this human nature. The closed exceptionalist exalts the glory and honor of America over and against the sin. The cynic favors the American transgressions over the many examples of virtue and dignity in the national story. Both the closed exceptionalist and the cynic make a false choice. Neither can hold human nature in tension, nor can they reconcile the tensions between dignity and fallibility in history. They only see purity or stain. The open exceptionalist patriot—that is, the citizen with a rightly ordered hierarchy of loves—can reconcile that tension by exalting God the Creator and Redeemer first, others second, and the self last.

The patriot can honor and even revere figures like George Washington, who was a slaveholder, and Martin Luther King, Jr., who was an adulterer, by celebrating the virtues they represented, but understanding that greatness in a person often manifests itself in great sins. Christians do not hide their faces from those sins, but consider them realistically, honestly, and patiently.

We seek, in the spirit of Christian charity, to rejoice with the truth, not in unrighteousness (1 Cor 13:6). At the same time, we recognize moral and spiritual greatness when we see it, celebrate and extol such greatness, and bend our energies to preserve the memory of those that had it, imitating them in our own lives. In doing so, faithful Christians in this country must sift American traditions through virtue and prepare to hand tradition down as a trust to the next generation so that they may enjoy the blessings of a nation that is truly great, even though it is not perfect.

In this way, the open exceptionalist patriot is the most grateful person in society. Gratitude is at the heart of rightly ordered patriotism, because the Christian patriot understands that every good and perfect gift proceeds from a good and loving God who works to bring life out of death, joy out of despair, victory out of defeat, salvation out of reprobation, and truth out of falsehood. Any national blessings we inherited did not come from our own efforts alone, but are a trust handed down to us by someone else who had our best interest in mind.

Even on this side of the eschaton, we can call the United States a good and great country, even despite its manifold flaws. We celebrate the things in its story that are worthy of celebration without a blushing face. We do not fear those who would mock or condemn us for rejoicing in those things that are true, honorable, right, pure, lovely, and of good report (Phil 4:8). We are not cowed by the shrill voices emanating from those who cannot hold two opposing realities in tension. Still, we are moral realists about fallen human nature, and how it is constantly disposed to make the created thing into a god to worship. Because we know ourselves better than anyone else, and because we know that sin is common to all, we know from experience that the most celebrated heroes of the past had hearts that were “more deceitful than all else and desperately sick” (Jer 17:9). Patriots know that the dead still speak, their deeds outlive them, and we as American citizens are who we are in great measure because of the consequences of their lives and actions. We get wisdom from taking the meaning of their lives seriously, rather than committing self-inflicted amnesia and intellectual suicide by cancelling those who make us uncomfortable.

My grandfather was a man with a nature like mine. He was a sinner, but he knew his need for a Savior. He understood that he could have no salvation apart from the atonement Christ made for him on the cross. As a young man, he found that to know Christ was to love Him, and loving Christ meant receiving with joy and thanksgiving the good gifts the Lord graciously gave him. Solomon wrote in Ecclesiastes 2:24–25, “There is nothing better for a man than to eat and drink and tell himself that his labor is good. This also I have seen that it is from the hand of God. For who can eat and who can have enjoyment without Him?” My grandfather—a great yet flawed husband, father, grandfather, friend, churchman, patriot, and public servant—understood this as well as anyone I have ever known. He was a true patriot, and though dead, he still speaks.

My grandfather followed the example of the Lord Jesus, who had no flaws, and perfectly demonstrated what rightly ordered love in the way He taught His disciples to pray in the Lord’s Prayer, recorded in Matthew 6:9–13. We start by hallowing God in our hearts and minds, because all of our acts of love are predicated upon God first loving us (1 John 4:19). We seek first His kingdom, because in doing so, we demonstrate that our first love is for Christ and His ways (Matt 6:33). We further demonstrate our desire for our earthly kingdom, America, to reflect the righteousness of the kingdom of God, even though we are realistic about our fallen world, and we know that we will not usher in God’s kingdom by our own works. Nevertheless, Christians should bend all their energies toward directing the nation in ways that are pleasing to God. In all this, we Christians are ever aware of our own faults and our need for forgiveness. We know that we are fallible, and we embrace our convictions with humility. As we seek forgiveness for ourselves, we forgive others. The nation can and should be built upon such a righteous foundation. True patriotism is possible only when worship, loyalties, and loves are directed rightly.

With regard for God’s will be pertinent to the relationship between church and state, the Lord Jesus provided a simple, yet profound admonition. In Mark 12:13–17, we read the account of a group of Pharisees and Herodians attempting to ensnare Jesus in a political dilemma. “Is it permissible to pay a poll tax to Caesar or not? Are we to pay, or not to pay?” First, we should note

that the Pharisees and the Herodians formed a strange alliance. The Pharisees were anti-Hellenistic, that is, they wanted to preserve Jewish national and religious identity in the face of encroaching pagan culture represented most acutely by the Greek philosophy, art, and religion. The Herodians, supporters of the rule of Herod Antipas, were pro-Hellenistic. The fact that they joined forces to ensnare Jesus speaks clearly of their irrational obsession with destroying Him, as well as their betrayal of their own cultural and religious agendas. Second, they were convinced that there was no way out for Jesus once they asked their question. If He answered in the affirmative, He would alienate the Jewish people who were united in their displeasure with being ruled by the Romans. If He answered in the negative, He would be seen as seditious: His arrest as a subversive rebel would be justifiable. The Lord's response not only disarmed and discredited them in the hearing of the people, but it is also eminently instructive for us today as we seek to formulate a rightly ordered set of loves regarding our love for God and our love for country. He said, "Why are you testing Me? Bring Me a denarius to look at." And they brought one. And He said to them, 'Whose image and inscription is this?' And they said to Him, 'Caesar's.' And Jesus said to them, 'Pay to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.' And they were utterly amazed at Him."

In His response, Jesus taught that we owe God a set of loyalties and we owe our country another set of loyalties. Just a few verses down in Mark 12:29–31, Jesus taught that our first loyalty was to God and our second loyalty was to our neighbor. We are to pay God our first devotion, our first love, all we are and all we ever will be. We owe others our second devotion, in that we are to love our neighbor as we love ourselves and to treat others as we would want to be treated (Matt 7:12). What we pay to God is our absolute love, trust, and obedience. What we pay to Caesar is our loyalty and obedience as citizens under temporal authority. We owe our nation a form of neighbor love, and we pay that neighbor love in our daily acts as loyal citizens. We obey the laws of the state because we know that God is the source of the state's authority (Rom 13:1). Obedience to the state is an extension of our love for God. Love for country is an expression of obedience to its authority, which is an extension of our love for God. In all this, we order our loves appropriately. We love God first, and our love for God motivates our love for country.

As early as the second century, Christian apologists were making this very argument. In the context of the expansion of the church and Roman persecution of Christians, Justin Martyr (ca. 114–165) wrote his *Apology*, addressing it directly to the Roman emperor and the Roman Senate. He sought to dispel myths about Christian religious practices as well as the charge that Christians were disloyal to Rome. In fact, he wrote, Christians were the finest citizens Rome possessed in its vast empire. According to Justin, “more than all other men are [Christians] your helpers and allies in promoting peace.”⁷ The source of their love of Rome was their love for God and devotion to His commands, such as Luke 6:29, “Whoever hits you on the cheek, offer him the other also; and whoever takes away your coat, do not withhold your shirt from him either” and Matthew 5:16, “Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.” Justin cited these passages in the context of making the argument that the Christians’ love for Rome was demonstrated in peace and good deeds in the public square. He wrote, “we ought not to strive; neither has He desired us to be imitators of wicked men, but He has exhorted us to lead all men, by patience and gentleness, from shame and the love of evil.”⁸ The Christians put love of God first, but in terms of temporal affairs, their loyalty and love was for Rome and for Rome’s rulers. Thus, he wrote, “Whence to God alone we render worship, but in other things we gladly serve you, acknowledging you as kings and rulers of men, and praying that with your kingly power you be found to possess also sound judgment.”⁹

In these references to the Lord Jesus’ teaching in Mark 12 and Justin Martyr’s second century address to Emperor Antoninus Pius, we have a demonstration of the symbiotic relationship between Scripture, theology, and history. We have direct biblical guidance on how to think about ordering our loyalties rightly. In that biblical passage, we see the theological doctrine of Christ as the God-man as the personification of divine wisdom in the face of his adversaries. And we have Justin Martyr applying Scripture and theology to

⁷ Justin Martyr, *The First Apology of Justin*, in *The Apostolic Fathers, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus*, vol. 1, *Ante-Nicene Fathers* (1885; repr, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), 166.

⁸ Justin, *First Apology*, 168.

⁹ Justin, *First Apology*, 168.

real-world challenges that are relatable to our own in the present day. In this small example, we can see how necessary history is alongside the Bible and theology.

As we Americans consider what it means to be Christian patriots—those who order our loves with God as our first love, and country as an expression of love for God and for neighbor—we can differentiate between a closed exceptionalism and an open exceptionalism. A closed exceptionalism would put country ahead of God. An open exceptionalism would be an expression of rightly ordered patriotism. We do not have to come up with our own model without reference to the experience of Christians in past times and past contexts. As we think carefully and prayerfully about Christian patriotism, we can look to examples in the past, faithful Christians who loved God first, and as a result, all subsequent loves fall into order.

As Christian patriots, we find freedom to revere American traditions that are consistent with rightly ordered loves and loyalties. We can embrace the tradition of religious freedom in America, for example. Religious freedom is consistent with Scripture, in that we recognize that the state has no claim over the conscience (Dan 3; Acts 5:27–32). We recognize that persons exercise their will when it comes to submitting to, or rebelling against, the rule of God (Matt 19:16–26). We also see that Christians spread the gospel message by persuasion on the basis of sincere love, and not by the force of arms (Rom 10:13–21). As Americans who seek to conserve religious freedom, we recognize that our ultimate citizenship is in heaven (Phil 3:20), but we are called to faithfulness in the land of our sojourn here on earth (Jer 29:4–7)—and that is the basis of our tradition of freely worshipping God and practicing our convictions and faith in the public square without fear of reprisal by the state. Historically, we can look to the examples of luminaries such as Thomas Helwys (c. 1575–c. 1616), John Milton (1608–1674), Roger Williams (1603–1683), John Locke (1632–1704), William Penn (1644–1718), Samuel Davies (1723–1761), Isaac Backus (1724–1806), John Leland (1754–1841), Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826), James Madison (1751–1836), and Alexis de Tocqueville (1805–1859) for inspiration and wisdom on how religious freedom developed from a radical idea to an accepted part of ordinary life.

Being an American means being part of a great tradition. America is not perfect, but America is the greatest champion for human freedom in history. For that, we are to be grateful to God, who is the giver of all good and perfect gifts. Let us not be like pagans who refuse to honor God as God and who refuse to give Him thanks for the good gifts He has graciously given us, as Paul wrote about in Romans 1:21. Rather, let us give thanks to God for America, our home and our country, and for America's traditions which we have received from generations past as a trust to be handed down to future generations. Let us heed the words of Asaph in Psalm 50:22–23, as we meditate on God's good gifts to us in America and American tradition—

“Now consider this, you who forget God,
Or I will tear *you* in pieces, and there will be none to deliver.
“He who offers a sacrifice of thanksgiving honors Me;
And to him who orders his way aright
I shall show the salvation of God.”

Gratitude to God for the good gifts He has given us is the way of Christ.

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