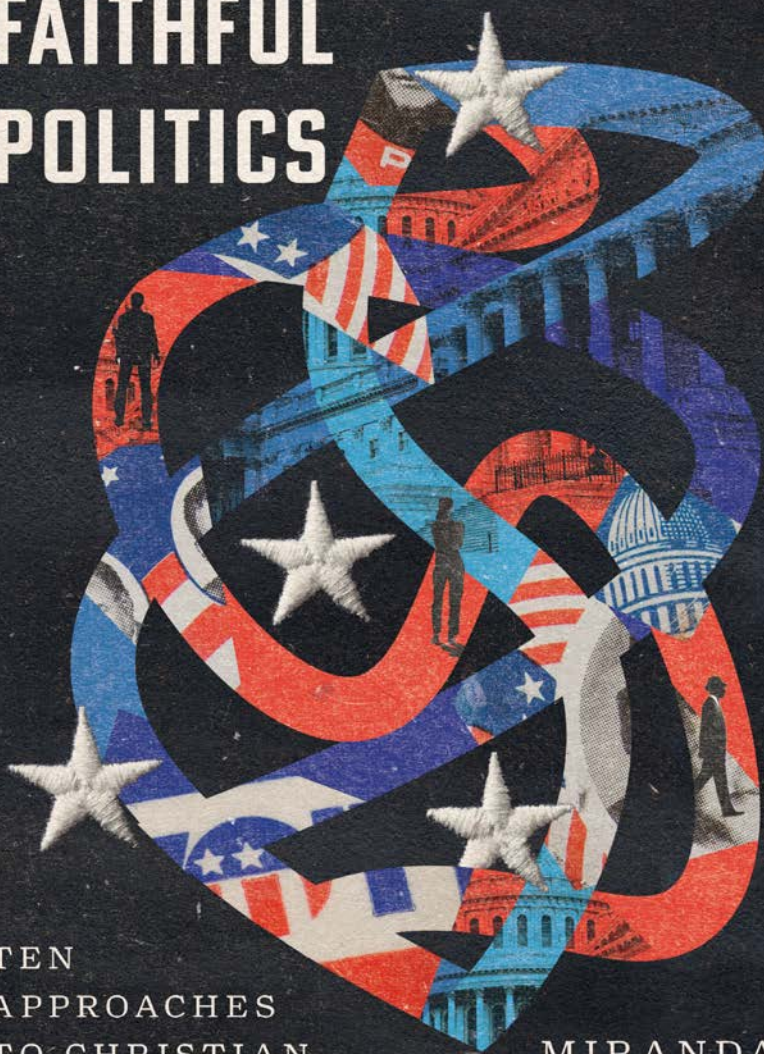


FAITHFUL POLITICS



TEN
APPROACHES
TO CHRISTIAN
CITIZENSHIP AND
WHY IT MATTERS

MIRANDA
ZAPOR
CRUZ



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CITIZENS OF THE KINGDOM



IN THE WEEKS LEADING UP to my first Fourth of July weekend as a Texas resident, I started to notice signs that I wasn't in New Jersey anymore. I had moved to Waco, also known as "Jerusalem on the Brazos," after living in New Jersey for five years. Rounding the corner on my church, I was surprised to discover that the sidewalk surrounding the building was lined with American flags. I soon learned my church celebrated Independence Day by meeting for only one weekend service, instead of the usual five, with music led by a patriotic band. I realized this wasn't unusual for the region, as I noticed billboards and radio ads promoting various "God and Country" services.

For some, this may be a familiar and unremarkable element of celebrating the Fourth of July. For others, it may be confusing or even off-putting, seemingly conflating worship of God with worship of the United States. The different reactions to a church lined with American flags illustrates the range of positions on the relationship between the Kingdom of God and the country. Are Kingdom and country mutually exclusive, or do they complement each other? Do they merely coexist, or are they mutually supporting? What does it mean to celebrate and participate in both citizenships?

Understanding what it means for Christians to be citizens of the Kingdom of God and of the United States requires us to recognize crucial distinctions between the two. I say "crucial," a word whose root is *crux* or cross, because the distinction is, indeed, the cross of Jesus Christ. The life,

death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the core reality that defines the Kingdom of God, and it is not the core reality that defines the United States—at least not constitutionally or legally. The Kingdom of God is not the United States, and the United States is not the Kingdom of God. What is the difference? And why does the difference matter?

THE CITY OF GOD

Questions about the relationship between Kingdom and country are not new. The earliest Christians wrestled with what it meant for them to live in a pagan society as Christians. Christians faced sporadic waves of persecution from the first to early fourth centuries because the government perceived them as anti-Roman, among other reasons. Minucius Felix (d. 260) accused Christians by saying, “[you] do not go to our shows, you take no part in our processions, you are not present at our public banquets, you shrink in horror from our social games.”¹ Christians wrestled with whether and how much to isolate themselves from society. Could they work for the government? Could they attend games or festivals that included pagan sacrifices? Early Christians were pacifist, but what of soldiers who became believers? Christian separation from society caused suspicion and confusion, and it marked them as something other than *real* Romans.

The writings of early Christians show them working through the complex dynamics of being in the empire, but not of it. The late-second-century “Epistle to Diognetus” describes the situation this way:²

For Christians are no different from other people in terms of their country, language, or customs. Nowhere do they inhabit cities of their own, use a strange dialect, or live life out of the ordinary. . . . And they show forth the character of their own citizenship in a marvelous and admittedly paradoxical way by following local customs in what they wear and what they eat and in the rest of their lives. They live in their respective countries, but only as resident aliens; they participate in all things as citizens, and they endure all things as foreigners. Every foreign territory is a homeland for them, every homeland foreign territory.³

¹Robert L. Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 66. All dates are CE unless otherwise designated.

²Diognetus was a tutor to emperor Marcus Aurelius. Robert M. Grant, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 2, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 201.

³“Epistle to Diognetus,” in *The Apostolic Fathers*, vol. 2, trans. Bart D. Ehrman, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 139-41.

Similarly, Justin Martyr (ca. 100–165) wrote his “First Apology” to defend Christians who were being accused and unjustly punished on the basis of rumors about Christian beliefs and practices. Justin reassured Roman officials, and especially the emperor, that Christians were a benefit to the empire, because, “more than all other men are we your helpers and allies in promoting peace” and “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.”⁴ Thus, early Christians endeavored to balance their citizenship in heaven with their citizenship in the Roman Empire by contributing to peace and the common good, while refusing to participate in idolatry.

Everything changed in the year 312, when Emperor Constantine saw a vision of a cross as he led his troops into battle and shifted his allegiance from the Roman deities to the God of the Christians, according to the fourth-century historian Eusebius.⁵ In 313, Constantine declared Christianity to be legally tolerated. Emperor Theodosius then made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire in 380. Christians hailed this as God’s triumph over powers and principalities and a sign that the end times were rapidly approaching. The Roman Empire had become Christian. The tension between citizenship in heaven and citizenship in the empire seemed to dissolve. The city of Rome was already significant for Christians as the site of Peter’s and Paul’s martyrdoms and the seat of the bishop of Rome, who had primacy among all bishops of the Western church. Now that the cultural capital of the Western world was also the ecclesial capital of a Christian empire, Christians granted it even greater theological importance.⁶

Until it all came crashing down. The Visigoths sacked the city of Rome in 410, laying siege to what Christians had come to see as the Holy City. This was more than a military defeat; it was an existential and theological crisis for which Christians were completely unprepared. Having conflated

⁴Justin Martyr, “First Apology,” Ante-Nicene Fathers, vol. I, trans. Philip Schaff (1885), ch. XII, CCEL.org, https://ccel.org/ccel/justin_martyr/first_apology/anf01.viii.ii.html.

⁵Eusebius, *Church History of Eusebius*, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, vol. I, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1890), Book IX, Ch. IX, <https://ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf201/npnf201.iii.xv.ix.html>.

⁶Rome had long ceased to be the seat of the imperial government, but it retained cultural and political significance in the west even as Rome’s capital moved east to Constantinople. Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), 287.

the Kingdom of God with the Roman Empire for several generations, Christians hardly knew how to separate the collapse of the imperial capital from the collapse of God's Kingdom itself.

Augustine (354–430), bishop of Hippo, witnessed the panic and dread in his congregants as the Eternal City, as the poet Virgil had called it in his *Aeneid*, was laid waste and refugees flooded across the Mediterranean to North Africa. He wrote to his shaken congregation:

What are you scared about, just because earthly kingdoms perish? That's the reason that a heavenly one's been promised you, that you won't perish with the earthly. . . . Earthly kingdoms go through changes, but there will be One coming of whom it is said: "And of His kingdom there will be no end" (Luke 1:33). . . . Why do we place our heart on earth when we can see earth is getting turned upside down?⁷

Amid this political and theological crisis, Augustine wrote his famous tome *City of God*. In it, he differentiated "the earthly city" from the "City of God," recognizing that a failure to make such a distinction had devastating consequences for the church. Augustine wrote that God created the earthly city, and it was originally good and glorified its Creator. But when sin entered the world, it infected everything humanity did, including forming societies and governments, and twisted humanity toward self-glorification. Therefore, Augustine characterized the earthly city as sinful, violent, and temporal, in contrast to the holy, peaceable, and eternal City of God. The earthly city's inhabitants "live according to man," while the inhabitants of the City of God "live according to God."⁸

Perhaps the most fundamental difference between the inhabitants of each city is the orientation of their love. Augustine wrote, "Love of self, even to the point of contempt for God, made the earthly city, and love of God, even to the point of contempt for self, made the heavenly city . . . The former loves its own strength, displayed in its men of power; the latter says to its God, *I love you, O Lord, my Strength*."⁹ Because of the sharp contrast between the city of man and City of God, Christians needed guidance for how to live in the present age as citizens of both cities.

⁷Augustine of Hippo, "Sermon 105," in *Augustine in His Own Words*, ed. William Harmless, SJ (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 322.

⁸Augustine of Hippo, *The City of God* XVI, vol. 7 of *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, trans. William Babcock (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2013), 139.

⁹Augustine, *City of God* XIV.28, vol. 7 of *Works of Saint Augustine*, 136-37. Italics in original.

Augustine described Christians as dual citizens of the City of God and the city of man, and provided instruction for how to live as citizens of the earthly city without forsaking citizenship in the heavenly city. For dual citizens, the highest law was the love of God and neighbor. Christians should obey the laws of the land as model citizens contributing to the common good, do no harm, and help whenever possible. They should not become utopian, believing they will bring about the City of God through their good works; but neither should they be cynical, seeing all earthly effort as meaningless.

Augustine also explained there is no such thing as a Christian empire, because the temporal and militant nature of empire is at odds with the eternal and peaceable nature of the heavenly city. The city of man was not and would not become the City of God; therefore, people must not consider the city of man to be an end in itself or an object of worship. Since earthly kingdoms are temporary and infected with sin, there are limits to the earthly dominion and authority of any earthly kingdom, in contrast with the universal dominion and authority of God. Despite these sharp distinctions, Christians ought to seek earthly peace and follow the laws and customs of the earthly city, as long as they do not interfere with worship of the one true God.¹⁰

These distinctions between the City of God and the earthly city have been foundational for Western Christianity since the fifth century. Despite a sixteen-century gap between Augustine's time and ours, the distinction between the City of God and the city of man can be adapted to the circumstances of twenty-first-century Christians living in the United States.

OPPOSING FOUNDATIONS OF THE KINGDOM AND THE COUNTRY

A building's foundation determines how it functions. Whether it is the house built on the rock versus the sand (Matthew 7:24-27), or on concrete slab versus cinder blocks, the foundation determines the permanence, purpose, and stability of the structure. The Kingdom of God and the United States are built on different foundations; therefore, the two function very differently. Where the Kingdom of God is eternal, the United States is temporal; where the Kingdom is universal, the country has boundaries; while the Kingdom has abundant resources, the country has limited resources. These opposing foundations demonstrate the differences between

¹⁰Augustine, *City of God* XIX.17, vol. 7 of *Works of Saint Augustine*, 375.

Kingdom and country and should raise questions about the character of Christian citizenship in the country.

Eternal vs. temporal. Those of us who watched in horror as the Twin Towers collapsed on September 11, 2001 felt something similar to what the Romans felt in 410. The attack on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon shook to the core many American Christians who had assumed America was unshakable, or even uniquely ordained to stand as a symbol of God's providential favor. Americans have trouble conceiving of the United States as inherently temporal. We learn the history and mythology of the country's origins in grade school, but in learning about how the country began we do not also consider how it might end. We learn about the collapse of empires around the world and throughout history, but as a country we prefer not to imagine a similar fate might one day befall the United States. We think our military or our economic dominance will secure our future, or our system of government will prevent collapse. Other countries may disintegrate, but the United States will endure until, well, forever.

Augustine gives us a stark reminder that "earthly kingdoms perish." Only God and his Kingdom are imperishable, and we cannot ascribe imperishability to anyone or anything other than God. Even as we work to preserve and protect the stability of the United States, we must not pretend it is eternal. Whether its demise is geopolitical or eschatological, the United States will come to an end. It is temporary, perishable, impermanent, by its very nature. This temporality of the United States stands in stark contrast to the eternal Kingdom of God. As unsettling as the collapse of earthly kingdoms might be, the permanence of God's Kingdom has been and should continue to be a source of profound comfort to the people of God.

The Hebrew people invoked God's eternal reign repeatedly in circumstances of temporal threat. The prophetess Miriam declared, "the LORD will reign forever and ever" as she watched the destruction of Pharaoh's army (Exodus 15:18). The author of Lamentations, writing in the midst of devastating exile, cried out, "But you, O LORD, reign forever; your throne endures to all generations" (Lamentations 5:19). And John of Patmos wrote of a choir of angels proclaiming, "he will reign forever and ever" (Revelation 11:15). In times of earthly upheaval, the eternal Kingdom is a source of hope for Christians.

At the time of the September 11 attacks, I was taking a sociology course with a professor who was a Christian from Bethlehem and had grown up as a refugee in Gaza. In the wake of the tragedy, even as he urged his family to remain at home for fear of anti-Middle Eastern violence and prejudice, he taught us about the temporality of earthly kingdoms. He had grown up in the liminal space that was created when one earthly kingdom supplanted another. While the attack on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon was shocking to him, it did not cause existential fear the way it did for many of his students and colleagues. He knew that earthly kingdoms pass away, and that we are only secure when our identity and hope are firmly settled in the Kingdom of God. He handled our shock and fear gently, while also urging us to reconsider our perceptions of American strength and permanence.

Earthly kingdoms are temporal, and we await the establishment of the eternal kingdom of God. While we wait, we work for the stability and well-being of the earthly cities we inhabit, even as we recognize that we are sojourners awaiting the return of our King.

Universal vs. boundaried. To say that the Kingdom of God is universal is to say that there is no realm of heaven or earth that is beyond God's sovereign jurisdiction. As Creator of all things, seen and unseen, all powers and principalities exist within and beneath God's authority, not in an autonomous realm beyond God's reach. The manner and degree to which God exercises authority in the world is a point of doctrine about which Christians differ; but Christians of all theological persuasions affirm that God's eternal Kingdom is a world without temporal or geographic limits.

In Revelation 21:25, John describes the new Jerusalem as having gates that are never shut, a powerful image of God's Kingdom as open and unthreatened. Fortified cities, including ancient Jerusalem, were surrounded by walls with gates that were shut to ward off attack. When John describes the gates that will "never be shut by day" (Revelation 21:25), he is describing a Kingdom whose boundaries are permeable, not fortified. The new Jerusalem never ends because there is no existential threat to God's eternal Kingdom.

The United States and all other countries, kingdoms, or empires sharply differ from the Kingdom of God in that they have geographical borders that demarcate the limits of governing authorities. Borders are abstract concepts that are codified in maps and treaties, and they are as permeable

or impermeable as the geopolitical or economic or cultural conditions dictate. These often-arbitrary borders play a powerful role in the ways we define ourselves and our communities, connecting and dividing people based on invisible lines. If a government attempts to extend its authority beyond those boundaries, it is an act of war or colonization. Boundaries shift—empires expand and contract, countries are created and divided—but the boundaries exist, even when they are contested. In the United States, “The Border” has strong political resonance in recent years, evoking anger, fear, compassion, resentment, welcome, and a whole range of partisan talking points. Securing the border is a common goal across the political spectrum today, though people mean different things by it. How do we live as dual citizens of countries with borders and the Kingdom of God that transcends geography?

Living with primary citizenship in the Kingdom of God and secondary citizenship in the United States has implications for the way we think about the people across our geopolitical borders. For Christians, our understanding of God’s universal Kingdom, and the way we regard humans who inhabit it, begins with the images of humanity in Genesis 2:23 and Revelation 7:9. Genesis 2 tells the story of God creating the man and the woman. The key point for conceptualizing human-made borders is the man’s reaction to the woman: “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken” (Genesis 2:23). The man has two reactions: first, he regards the woman as the same as he is, then he recognizes her as different. Critically, the man reacts positively to both the sameness and the difference. The difference (woman) complements, rather than negates, the sameness (bones and flesh).

When sin enters the world, humans become alienated from one another. The recognition of sameness is diminished and difference is weaponized. In short, humans now notice difference first, view difference negatively, and elevate difference above sameness. This alienation contributes to everything from lunch table segregation to xenophobic violence. For citizens of the Kingdom of God, part of the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit is to reorder the way we recognize people: as same first, as different second, and both sameness and difference as good. Human difference should evoke the same “Ah!” Adam experienced when he welcomed Eve’s difference rather than feeling threatened by it. The difference

drew them together instead of driving them apart, illustrating God's design for human community.

Borders and the policies governing them can be complicated, but our recognition of our fellow humans as “bone of my bone” should define the way we talk about and treat people of all nationalities and creeds. A biblical vision of humanity leaves no room for dehumanizing the “bone of our bones” across borders.

Our fraternal ties to sisters and brothers in the body of Christ also inform our understanding of borders. Revelation 7:9 presents an image of the eternal Kingdom of God in which “a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages” worship God as one body. It may surprise some Christians in the United States to learn that of the ten countries with the highest number of Christians, seven of them are in Latin America, Asia, or Africa. In the Kingdom of God, Christians from the United States will be worshiping alongside Christians from Mexico, Nigeria, China, and Italy—all countries that have fraught histories with the US border and immigration policies. Immigration policy is complicated, but it is not complicated to recognize Christians from other countries and cultures as people with whom we will worship in the Kingdom of God.

Perhaps you've had a taste of the eternal Kingdom when traveling or worshiping in a very diverse church context. This is one benefit of international short-term missions or domestic crosscultural partnerships. When they are done well, these crosscultural encounters can expand people's vision of the Kingdom of God and reorder the way Christians think about and treat people from across borders. When we worship as one body with believers of different nationalities and cultures, the Spirit can work to reorder the way we see other people, sanctifying our eyes to recognize sameness first, then to welcome difference. This does not necessarily lead to an “open borders” policy for nation-states, but it must factor into the way we think about the reasons for and means of enforcing geopolitical boundaries.

Abundance vs. scarcity. The economies of the Kingdom of God and the United States operate on fundamentally different bases. The Kingdom of God distributes resources based on abundance, confident there is plenty for all. The biblical narrative is teeming with examples of this abundance principle. Humanity's story begins in a garden where God has provided

humanity everything they need (Genesis 2:8-9). Scarcity and selfishness result from sin's entry into the world. God taught the Israelites the abundance principle by providing manna and quail in the desert. Moses assured the wandering Israelites that God would provide sufficient food for each day's needs, but he warned them not to store any excess for the next day. When some attempted to hold back extra manna, it rotted (Exodus 16).

Similarly, the so-called gleaning laws illustrate the expectation that the people of God should operate according to Kingdom economics of abundance in order to care for the poor and oppressed (Leviticus 19 and 23). The Israelites were to trust there would be plenty to feed their own tribes, even when they left 10 percent of the crop unharvested. The widow of Zarephath miraculously had enough grain and oil to feed herself and her son for many days, a reminder of God's abundant provision (1 Kings 17:8-16). The Hebrew prophets reserved some of their harshest words of judgment for those who amassed great wealth while neglecting the needs of the poor. Jesus also provided an object lesson in abundance when he fed thousands by multiplying a few loaves and fishes (Matthew 14:13-21). Those who were fed experienced a foretaste of the Kingdom of God, which John of Patmos described as a restoration of Eden, with its river and tree of life that feeds the restored humanity without any fear of scarcity (Revelation 22:1-2). Where there is no concern about lack, there is no selfishness, hoarding, or regarding of fellow human beings as mere competition.

In contrast, the United States and all other countries distribute resources on the basis of scarcity, concerned there is not enough to go around. While people in many parts of the world are well-acquainted with scarce resources, people in the United States generally assume that when we go to the store we will find what we need, although the ability to afford basic necessities varies greatly. Many Americans were alarmed to discover in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic that our local grocery stores were out of toilet paper, and a baby formula shortage frightened parents in the spring of 2022. In some cases, these shortages brought people together through sharing information and resources. But they also illustrated a fundamental selfishness of humanity, as many hoarded resources or even tried to sell necessities online at inflated prices.¹¹

¹¹Jumaane D. Williams, "Price Gouging and the COVID-19 Pandemic: Policy Brief," Office of the New York City Public Advocate, March 25, 2020, www.pubadvocate.nyc.gov/reports/price-gouging-amid-covid-19-pandemic/.

The reasons resources become scarce vary and can be complicated, but whatever the root causes of scarcity, the economic principal at work is the relationship between supply, demand, and price. Basic macroeconomics dictates that when supply is low and demand is high, prices are high. Prices are set based on real or perceived scarcity of a product or service. Demand is also influenced by real or perceived scarcity. Scarcity can influence the way people treat one another. It brings out the best and the worst in us. Some people find ingenious ways to meet their needs and band together in mutual support, while others attain things through violence or corruption. Scarcity can be devastating and deadly, whether it is real or only perceived.¹² And the scarcity principle forms the foundation for how the United States and other global economies function.

We cannot expect the United States to run its economy according to principles of abundance. Since the world is fallen, resources are indeed limited, and those limits have real human and financial consequences that Christians cannot ignore or pretend away. This reality demonstrates just how radically different the United States or any other country is from the Kingdom of God. God does not subscribe to the economic theories of Friedrich Hayek, John Maynard Keynes, or Karl Marx, but Christians live in countries that do. Citizens of the Kingdom of God can live according to the abundance principle as much as possible through extravagant generosity and a level of trust in God's provision that may seem to defy logic.

OPPOSING VALUES OF THE KINGDOM AND THE COUNTRY

The Kingdom of God and the United States are built on different foundations, and they also advance different values. Values that animate both the Kingdom of God and the United States include loyalty, freedom, power, and justice. However, these values have different meanings in the Kingdom of God than they do in the country. Christians damage our mission and witness in the world when we confuse Kingdom of God values with the values of the United States.

Loyalty. The Kingdom of God and the country vie for our loyalty, sometimes resulting in confusion about the connection between God and country. In the classic film *National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation*, elderly

¹²Maysa DeSousa and Kaitlyn Rego, "Perceived Scarcity Across Sociodemographic Backgrounds Predicts Self-Reported Health," *European Journal of Health Psychology* 30, no. 2 (2023): 74-86, <https://doi.org/10.1027/2512-8442/a000122>.

Aunt Bethany folds her hands to say grace over Christmas dinner, then begins to recite the Pledge of Allegiance, prompting the whole family to reflexively recite along, Cousin Eddie standing with his hand over his heart. In the equally classic film *Sister Act*, the lounge-singer-turned-fake-nun Sister Deloris Van Cartier concludes her first mealtime prayer with “and to the republic for which it stands . . .” before declaring the gathered sisters “ready to eat, Amen.” These amusing moments illustrate how engrained the recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance is: if we’re reciting, it must be the Pledge. They also illustrate how complicated loyalty can be for Christians, when prayer and pledge can be conflated.

While a faithful Christian would not likely confuse the Pledge of Allegiance with a mealtime prayer, it is not at all unusual for loyalty to country to be confused or conflated with loyalty to God’s Kingdom. Since the United States is not and will not become the Kingdom of God, loyalty to the two must also be clearly differentiated. For Christians in the United States, both Kingdom and country demand loyalty. The difference is that loyalty to the Kingdom must be unconditional, while loyalty to the country must be conditional. Loyalty to the Kingdom must be absolute, relativizing all other loyalties. Loyalty to the country must be subordinated to the Kingdom and generously seasoned with critique.

If you grew up in the United States, you likely recited the Pledge of Allegiance in school and sang the national anthem at sporting events. You may have taken an oath of enlistment for military service or participated in an oath ceremony to become a naturalized citizen. Citizenship requires some degree of loyalty to country, at least enough to motivate a citizen to obey the law and contribute to her community. Loyalty to country may take the form of working in public service, standing for the national anthem, displaying the American flag, serving in the armed forces, or observing national holidays. Some people also express loyalty to country through protesting the country’s failures, while others express loyalty through celebrating its accomplishments, and many citizens do both. It can be difficult for American Christians to be simultaneously loyal and critical, because critique of the country’s failures can be perceived as unpatriotic or disloyal. But absolute loyalty to the country, loyalty that is unconditional and refuses to recognize ways in which the country falls short of its own ideals and of the Kingdom, is not an option for Christians. Our loyalty to the country must have limits, and if it doesn’t, then it trespasses into the loyalty reserved for God alone.

Loyalty to the Kingdom of God, on the other hand, is absolute and has no limit. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego demonstrate the limited loyalty to a king in contrast to unlimited loyalty to God (Daniel 3). King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon conscripted these exiled Judahite men to serve in his palace, which they did willingly and skillfully. But their service to the king had strict limits: they would not eat unclean food or worship the golden statue Nebuchadnezzar constructed. Loyalty to God placed limits on their royal service, and Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were prepared to die rather than violate their commitment to God. When our country or its leaders make demands on our loyalty that contradict our obedience to God, then our loyalty must find its limit.

If we find ourselves making excuses to remain loyal to a country or its leaders where that loyalty should have found a limit, we transgress the allegiance appropriate for a temporal kingdom. Americans in the armed services or government employees may find themselves in circumstances that directly test the limits of loyalty, but any of us may be called upon to live out our loyalty in costly ways in a country that is not the Kingdom of God. If we find ourselves making excuses to disobey commands to love God and neighbor, we are likely sacrificing our loyalty to the Kingdom for the sake of obedience to the lesser authority.

Freedom. “For freedom Christ has set us free,” and “where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom,” Paul wrote to the fledgling Christian communities (Galatians 5:1, 2 Corinthians 3:17). Scanning the wares at a local Christian book and gift store, I see these verses emblazoned on T-shirts, bumper stickers, and home decor, frequently combined with American flags or other patriotic symbols. The message of the patriotic images is that the freedom to which Paul was referring is the same freedom about which Americans sing, “from every mountainside, let freedom ring.” But in fact, it is not the same freedom at all.

I remember learning the phrase “it’s a free country” in elementary school. I promptly started to tell my parents and teacher that it meant I could do whatever I wanted, as they struggled in vain to explain my misinterpretation. In the United States and many other countries, freedom primarily refers to personal autonomy and individual rights. We are legally free to worship, to assemble, to speak, to pursue happiness without undue interference from neighbors or government. The adage, “your liberty to swing your fist ends where my nose begins,” attributed to Justice Oliver

Wendell Holmes (1841–1935), is a tidy summary of the American political definition of freedom. I am free to do as I please, as long as it does not cause harm to another person or violate their freedom to do as they please. The government's role is often described as preserving individual freedoms, even as political parties disagree about how the government should fulfill that function.

The fear of restricted liberty is so deeply rooted in the US collective consciousness that any perceived threat to individual freedom is often equated with tyranny, harkening back to the Revolutionary War. In recent years, the rhetoric of tyranny has been applied frequently to government efforts to address societal problems, from the mask mandates of the COVID-19 pandemic to attempts at gun regulations in the wake of thousands of mass shootings. The resistance to limitations on personal freedom illustrates the way Americans conceptualize freedom as individual autonomy. Any real or perceived threat to autonomy is vigorously, even violently, opposed.

Contrast this American meaning of freedom or liberty with the freedom for which Christ sets us free. One is hard-pressed to find Scripture passages emphasizing or promising to protect individual autonomy. In the Old Testament, freedom most often refers to setting captives free, such as in the Year of Jubilee or during the Babylonian exile. Jesus connected this freedom to his own ministry when he read from Isaiah, “he has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed” (Luke 4:18 quoting Isaiah 61:1).

While the New Testament continues the emphasis on freedom for the oppressed, it also emphasizes spiritual freedom from the oppression of sin. When one is free, as Christian Scripture defines freedom, that means one is set free from sin and therefore at liberty to follow Christ. Indeed, this was how Paul explained freedom to the church in Galatia (Galatians 5:1-15). The way of Christ is not the way of individual autonomy. It is quite the opposite, as Paul explained to the church at Philippi. Christians are to have the mind of Christ, who “did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave . . . and became obedient to the point of death” (Philippians 2:6-8). Freedom enables Christians to “do nothing from selfish ambition or empty conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others” (Philippians 2:3-4).

Freedom from sin turns the heart outward toward God and neighbor, instead of inward toward the self.

We see a stark contrast here between American and Christian definitions of freedom. America conceptualizes freedom as *for self*; the Kingdom conceptualizes freedom *for others*. Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945), German theologian and resister of the Nazi regime, explained freedom this way: “The creature is free in that one creature exists in relation to another creature, in that one human being is *free for another* human being.”¹³ Christian freedom liberates us from American freedom. This contrast highlights the reality that the Kingdom of God and the United States are fundamentally different entities.

When Christian and American definitions of freedom come into conflict, citizens of the Kingdom of God are called to live according to the Christian vision of freedom as *for others*, even when being for others requires us to limit our individual autonomy and set aside our own rights and preferences. Common phrases like “God-given freedom” can conflate Christian and American concepts of freedom so thoroughly that we can delude ourselves into believing that we are being faithful to God’s call even when we are causing harm to others by elevating personal autonomy above love of neighbor. When Christians baptize the American definition of freedom, we compromise our witness to the world. When Christians are perceived as being more concerned about our individual autonomy than we are about the needs of others, the gospel message becomes nothing more than a spiritualization of selfishness.

Power. Along a similar vein, a Christian concept of power radically differs from the American political concept of power. A Christian concept of power is correlated to sovereignty and, paradoxically, weakness. An American, or more broadly human, conception of power is based on the ability to coerce or bend people or institutions to one’s will. The power of any government is limited and potentially threatened, whereas the power of God is limitless and secure. The way political leaders exercise their power is conditioned by the way they understand their own limits and threats, resulting in various applications of positive and negative coercion. Suzanne Collins’s *The Hunger Games* trilogy provides a fictional dystopian example: President Snow positively coerces the people

¹³Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, vol. 3 in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, ed. John W. de Gruchy, trans. Douglas Stephen Bax (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 64. Emphasis added.

of the Capital with food and games (based on the “bread and circuses” model of the Roman Empire), while he negatively coerces the Districts by drafting their children into the arena to kill each other. The way God exercises power over his Kingdom is not conditioned upon anything other than God’s own being. Therefore, it has no limits, except those that God imposes upon himself, and no threats, except temporary ones over which God’s triumph is certain.

The US government has self-imposed limitations on its power, as well as internal and external threats to its power. Geography limits the range of its authority, as does the Constitution, and the consent of the governed. Geographic sovereignty is foundational for much of international law, and protecting that sovereignty “against all enemies, foreign and domestic” is one of the primary roles of the federal government and the military in the United States. The potential threat of a foreign power exerting its authority over the United States or its allies is the basis of most military and diplomatic policies. Foreign adversaries threaten the safety and stability of the United States, especially in a world that is increasingly global and susceptible to cyberwarfare. The US Constitution places internal limits on power, as the executive, judicial, and legislative branches of government provide checks and balances to prevent any branch of government from becoming tyrannical. In short, the structure of the government itself intentionally limits political power.

In the United States, the “consent of the governed” is perhaps the most significant and unique limit and threat to the government’s power. According to the Declaration of Independence, governments derive “their just powers from the consent of the governed,” or at least they ought to. While Americans take for granted the idea that citizens have a say in how we are governed, it was a radical, indeed a revolutionary, concept in the eighteenth century. While England had a Parliament with elected regional representatives, the system by which members of Parliament were elected was notoriously corrupt and not all regions were represented.¹⁴ Philosophically, England’s monarchy was rooted in the Divine Right of Kings, under which “kings are . . . God’s lieutenants upon earth” and “their power . . . is

¹⁴“The Origins of Parliament,” UK Parliament, accessed September 14, 2023, www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/electionsvoting/chartists/overview/originsofparliament/.

compared to divine power.”¹⁵ The monarch received his or her power to govern from God and exercised that power as God’s representative on earth. The American Revolution turned this notion of government on its head, declaring that the government’s power derived from the people, not from God. Thus, the citizens place limits upon and can even threaten the government’s power. People disagree about God’s role in the government, as we will see throughout this book, but as a starting point we need to recognize that limits and threats condition political power in the United States. Because America’s power is inherently limited and threatened, it is different from the power the triune God exercises over God’s Kingdom.

In sharp contrast to the power of the American government, God’s power is limitless and unthreatened. Because the power of God is essential to God’s very being, and its legitimacy is not subject to any external validation, God is free to exercise power in ways that sharply contrast with governments. There are no internal or external threats to God’s omnipotence. Nothing is beyond God’s power or outside of God’s jurisdiction. The Kingdom of God has no need for checks and balances or internal limitations, because it is governed by a perfect, just, merciful King. Because God’s power is absolute and unrivaled, God is free to demonstrate power through weakness, sacrifice, death, and resurrection.

Governments and God exercise power in the modes that are proper to their natures. Governments do not have absolute or unlimited power, and when they attempt to gain power beyond their due, people call them tyrannical, resulting in popular rebellion or economic sanctions, or a host of other internal and external attempts to impose limits on power. When God exercises absolute and unlimited authority, God is simply being God. Humans and our governments cannot, and must not, attempt to exercise the authority that is proper to God alone. The power of the US government is fundamentally different from the power of God.

Justice. The United States and the Kingdom of God also differ in their norms of justice. The Kingdom of God has a single standard and source for justice, which is God’s own just nature. The United States has many competing definitions of justice that yield different methods and goals in civil society. In a diverse country like the United States, we should not be

¹⁵King James VI and I, “Speech to Parliament of 21 March 1610,” in *King James VI and I: Political Writings*, ed. Johann P. Sommerville, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 181.

surprised when different religions, philosophies, social movements, or individuals offer different visions of a just society. Any justice-oriented movement can be inspired by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s vision of a "beloved community," for example, while fundamentally differing about what that community should look like and how to work toward it.

What is justice? Is justice the result of citizens agreeing upon "the same political conception of justice, for example, a particular natural rights doctrine, or a form of utilitarianism, or justice as fairness," as American political philosopher John Rawls (1921–2002) suggested?¹⁶ Because the American people do not share the same vision or definition of justice, what one person or movement advocates as just another might reject as unjust. Moreover, different means of working toward justice are informed by different ideas about the role of government in the pursuit of a more just society. There is no reason to think that the people of the United States will ever adopt a single definition of justice or the same methods for pursuing it. Indeed, John Rawls claims such agreement is impossible, "given the fact of reasonable pluralism."¹⁷ Thus, the pursuit of justice is inherently limited and will always involve conflict, as ideologies compete for power and influence. In a diverse society, we often seek justice through trial and error, recognizing the lack of justice when we acknowledge the victims of injustice.

The Kingdom of God, on the other hand, has a single source and norm for justice, which is God's own being. While Christians may disagree about what constitutes God's justice, God is not confused or internally conflicted. In the eschatological Kingdom, justice simply will be reality, not something that must be strived for against the countervailing force of sin. Jesus' instruction to pray for God's Kingdom to come and will to be done on earth as in heaven (Matthew 6:10) is a directive for Christians to discern the justice of God, and to bring it into reality here and now, even as we recognize that it cannot be fully realized through the actions of any single person or government. Inasmuch as other religious or secular groups share a similar vision for justice, Christians can partner with them. However, Christians cannot abandon the justice of the Kingdom of God to settle for a secular definition of justice and/or adopt means of attaining justice that violate love of God and love of neighbor.

¹⁶John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, ed. Erin Kelly (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2001), 9.

¹⁷Rawls, *Justice as Fairness*, 9.

CITIZENS OF THE KINGDOM (AND OF THE COUNTRY)

It is common for Christians to take mission trips to parts of the country or the globe that get us out of our “comfort zone.” These kinds of experiences can help us think through our citizenship in the Kingdom and country. One of the reasons crosscultural life can be exhausting is our brains and bodies are constantly calculating what is appropriate and evaluating our own behaviors through the eyes of a culture that may find our mannerisms strange, incomprehensible, or even insulting. But crosscultural tension creates opportunities for deeper levels of self-examination and mutual understanding. The apostle Peter described Christians as “aliens and exiles” in the world (1 Peter 2:11), because we follow a Savior who “has nowhere to lay his head” (Matthew 8:20). Or, as Stanley Hauerwas and Will Willimon put it, “Christianity is an invitation to be part of an alien people who make a difference because they see something that cannot otherwise be seen without Christ.”¹⁸

We should become comfortable with the idea that living as Christians may sometimes place us at odds with the culture of the United States. We should embrace a crosscultural mindset that holds tight to our Kingdom citizenship, with its values and demands, while thoughtfully navigating the culture, values, systems, and laws of the earthly country in which we hold secondary citizenship.

The contrasts outlined in this chapter should make it clear that the Kingdom of God and the United States differ in foundational and radical ways. As such, they cannot and should not be treated as one and the same. While the demands of each may be compatible at times, their origin and direction diverge from each other significantly. These differences do not mean that the United States, or any other earthly country, is bad for failing to be the Kingdom of God, any more than a window is bad for failing to be a door. They are simply different in origin and aim. The United States is not, and will not become, the Kingdom of God, any more than a kiwi can grow into a cantaloupe. And yet, Christians live in both simultaneously, and must therefore learn how to live in the tension between the eternal Kingdom of God and the temporal United States.

How do we live according to the Kingdom truth of abundance and also the economic reality of scarcity? How do we live according to the

¹⁸Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, 25th anniversary ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2014), 24.

Kingdom's justice, while being subject to flawed legal systems and laws that cannot make God's justice a reality? How do we recite the Pledge of Allegiance, run for political office, vote, protest, advocate, or engage in other civic activities while also keeping our political loyalty subordinate to our citizenship in the Kingdom of God? These questions should rattle around in our minds and hearts, refusing to let us settle for simple answers. The next step in our exploration of faithful approaches to citizenship in the Kingdom and the country is an examination of what guidance Scripture offers as we navigate our dual citizenship.

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