

Should we love our country? What if we don't agree with its policies?

Robert McCluskey, October, 2022

This question reminds me of a sentiment I have heard all my life: "My country, right or wrong [!]" It is usually used as an absolute defense of the United States against any and all criticism, a nationalistic motto. What most people seem to be unaware of is the rest of that statement. Here's the whole thing: "My country, right or wrong; if right, to be kept right; and if wrong, to be set right." It was made on February 29, 1872, by Senator Carl Schurz (R-MO), on the floor of the Senate.⁽¹⁾ Far from an absolute defense, silencing all debate, it is a call to all citizens to exercise not just their rights, but their responsibilities as citizens of a democratic society.

Here I am thinking of these words from the First Amendment: "the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances." In the United States, we are free to disagree with and even work to change policies. But the onus to do so is on us.

In our service for Adult Baptism, we find these words: "The neighbor to be loved is not only individual people, but people in their group relationships. The larger the group, the greater our obligation to it. Our community, our country, the brotherhood of nations are larger neighbors; also our church, and other churches constituting the Lord's kingdom on earth. So again is the Lord's kingdom in heaven; and our highest neighbor is the Lord himself." ⁽²⁾

Notice how we are responsible for all of these "degrees" of the neighbor, with our country comprising just a smaller part of that responsibility. Neither irrelevant nor all important, our country is an important part (but only a part) of our spiritual responsibility. In between the purely personal and the purely cosmic; the messy world of relating to others. A world of dialogue and debate, of speaking and listening, of argument (in the best sense of that word) and compromise. Additionally, our church calls us to be active in all three realms of life: spiritual, moral, and civil. That is, we must cultivate our relationship to God, treat others with respect, and participate in the political on all levels.

I mentioned nationalism earlier. Einstein called it "an infantile disease." It is to be carefully distinguished from patriotism, or love of country, clearly identified as good in our Adult Baptism service. Nationalism goes further, and identifies one's country as absolutely good, and all other countries as "less than," inferior. Most readers know that nationalism continues to rise and assert itself in the United States and other countries, and that a significant contributing force in this rise is that of Christian nationalism. For those who interested, more on this threat can be found in the Messenger, Feb. 2022.

How do we love our country? When right to be kept right, and when wrong to be set right!

(1) Schurz, Carl, remarks in the Senate, February 29, 1872, *The Congressional Globe*, vol. 45, p. 1287.

(2) *Book of Worship of the Church of the New Jerusalem*; New Church Board of Publication, Brooklyn, NY, 1950