

Patriotism

By David J. Vaughan

Mel Gibson's award winning film *Braveheart* has taken the film Academy by storm. Filled with action, drama and romance, *Braveheart* has all the elements of a box-office smash. And indeed it was.

But the movie's popularity is more than the result of its excellent acting, able directing, stunning scenery or moving soundtrack. No, *Braveheart's* attraction lay foremost in those themes that touch us at our deepest level and appeal to our common humanity: themes such as love, courage and patriotism.

For the Christian, love and courage are certainly virtues. But what about patriotism? Can a follower of Jesus be both a good Christian and a good Patriot? Are love for God and love of country compatible? To answer that question we must first have a proper understanding of patriotism itself.

The Meaning of Patriotism

Love for one's ancestry, culture or homeland is the root meaning of patriotism. Derived from the Greek *patrios* ("of one's fathers") or *patris* ("one's fatherland") the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines a patriot as "one who disinterestedly or self-sacrificingly exerts himself to promote the well-being of his country. A patriot is "one who maintains and defends his country's freedom or rights."

While we tend to think of a patriot as a person who puts his country first in opposition to another country, originally the term meant one who supported the rights of "country" or "land" against the King and his court. In other words, a patriot stood for the rights of local self-government and was opposed to tyrannical rule—even by his own King. Thus, true patriotism is the impulse to defend one's land, country or way of life against unjust governmental oppression.

The Founding Fathers

This understanding of patriotism was exemplified by America's founding fathers. To a man, the founders admired and imitated British culture (See Russell Kirk's *America's British Culture*). American society and government were intentionally patterned after the British model. Even as political tensions with Britain increased during the critical years of 1765-1776, loyalty to the Crown was a virtue much insisted on by American colonial leaders. Though they tried to reconcile their differences with Great Britain, the breach between and Colonies and Crown only widened, and the Founders were eventually forced to break away from their fatherland.

The *Declaration of Independence* was then penned as a statement to the world of their reasons for being so bold to separate from England. Not only did the *Declaration* catalog the offenses of King George, but it also claimed that the American colonies were defending “the laws of nature and of nature’s God.” That eight-word phrase—“the laws of nature and of nature’s God”—encapsulated the principle upon which the Founders stood.

According to Blackstone’s *Commentaries on the Law*, from whom the phrase is taken, the laws of nature were nothing less than the will of God for man as revealed to man’s reason. However, because man’s reason is fallible and does not always perceive this law, God reiterated His law in the Holy Scriptures. Blackstone explained it like this:

“And if our reason were always ... clear and perfect ... the task would be pleasant and easy; we should need no other guide but this [law of nature]. But every man now finds the contrary in his own experience; that his reason is corrupt, and his understanding full of ignorance and error. This has given manifold occasion for the benign interposition of divine providence; which ... hath been pleased ... to discover [reveal] and enforce its laws by an immediate and direct revelation. The doctrines thus delivered we call the revealed or divine law, and they are to be found only in the Holy Scriptures.”

Blackstone then concluded his discussion of the law of nature by saying that “Upon these two foundations, the law of nature and the law of revelation depend all human laws: that is to say, no human laws should be suffered to contradict these.”

Thus the Founding Fathers, contrary to the modern notion of revolution, were not rebelling against law and order. They were not anarchists or revolutionaries. Rather, they were attempting to uphold the law of God against the unjust and oppressive laws of men. They had a profound respect for the “laws of nature and of nature’s God.” So instead of being “rebels without a cause” they were “patriots under the law”—the law of Almighty God.

Citizens of Heaven

The American patriots stood in a long tradition of Christian political theory, as exemplified by Blackstone, Vattel and others, which sanctioned the right to resist unjust human laws. While it was recognized the Scriptures placed great emphasis on due submission to civil authorities (Rom. 13), there are also passages that approve resistance to ungodly authority. For instance, when the apostles were commanded by the Sanhedrin (which was both a religious and civil tribunal) to cease preaching the gospel, Peter boldly asserted: “We ought to obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29).

In essence, in our hierarchy of values, God must always be placed before man. God takes precedence over our country or government. Because a Christian is a citizen of two countries, -- the heavenly and the earthly—when these two are in conflict his primary allegiance must always be to his heavenly country and Sovereign, the Lord Jesus Christ. It is no coincidence that one of the slogans of the American Revolution was “No King but King Jesus.”

Christian Bravehearts

When the Scot patriot William Wallace lay dying, being disemboweled by the King's executioner, his final cry was not "Scotland." It was "freedom!" And when the fiery American patriot Patrick Henry aroused Virginia to resist British tyranny his cry was not "America." It was "liberty!" Thus it is noteworthy that those men who are now recognized as great patriots stood on higher ground than a simple or selfish love for their own country. On the contrary they stood on the pinnacle of principle—principles that are reflected in God's word and transcend loyalty to one's own country.

Can a disciple of Jesus be a patriot? Yes. Because real patriotism is not the exaltation of one's country over someone else's simply because it is "mine." Rather it is the courage to stand on God's Word in the face of unjust human authority, whether in one's own country or abroad. It means being a citizen of heaven first and a citizen of our country second. And most importantly, it means that we live out our lives, even in the political realm, with our primary allegiance to God. Those who live in this manner are the real patriots in the eyes of God.