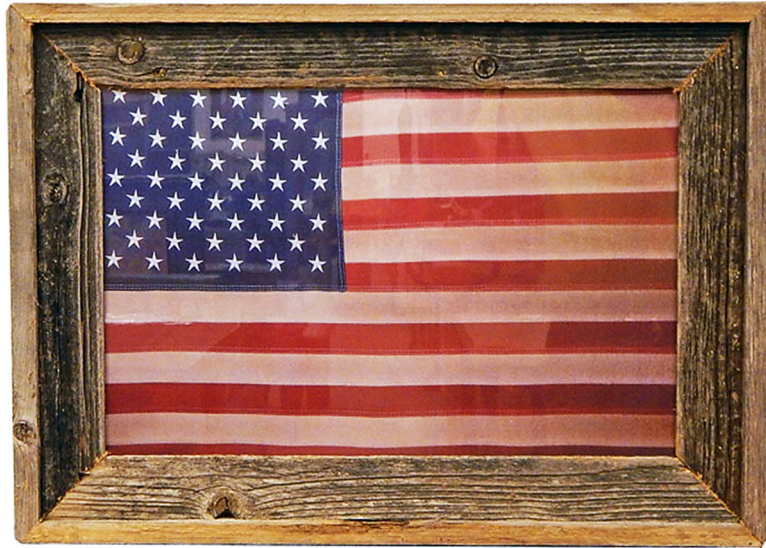


Lifting High the Cross and Waving the Flag

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



Prayer of Illumination

Blessed Lord, who caused all holy scriptures to be written for our learning, grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope over everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ.
Amen.

Background



What does it look like for Christians to live faithfully in society? More specifically, what's our attitude and posture towards power structures and authorities? What's our relationship with the State? What's the State's relationship to God? To us? On this 4th of July, how do we best understand "God and Country" as believers?

In other words, how do we *lift high the cross and wave the flag*? I think this might be one of the most important topics for the church today.

This isn't always easy to figure out. For sure, there's a lot of heated debate out there about this. There are often two extreme responses: unquestioning obedience or incessant critique of our country—depending on if your preferred party is in office or not. I believe there's a third way, a better way.

But before we jump into our morning's passage, we need some context.

First, it's crucial to understand how the Hebrew Scriptures understand our relationship to government and leaders. They teach that the Sovereign God intervenes in history—setting up governments and also toppling them. God can even use pagan rulers to accomplish his purposes. So respecting the imperfect earthly powers God has set up is one way for us to show our respect for God's authority—to a certain point. We can't forget, God also judges and holds accountable not only the ruled, but rulers—both Jew and Gentile.

Second, the people of God are called to contribute to rather than detract from society. The prophet Jeremiah puts it this way, "seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare."

So, pitch in and help work towards the common good of society—it will end up helping you, too. This is a spiritual task.

Yet at the same time, we can't forget the Bible stories of Daniel and the Lion's Den and Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego and the fiery furnace—where these heroes of the faith resisted Babylon's demands to worship not God, but the State.

We also need a better understanding of ancient Rome's political environment before reading our Romans passage. It was totally different than our modern democracy. The Roman government was run by a select few. The vast majority of the population had zero political power or avenues to bring change. It was designed that way.

The political system didn't include things we presently enjoy like voting, running for office, multiple news channels, lobbying, petitions, or the freedom to engage in peaceful dialogue or protest. We're incredibly fortunate to have these avenues and options today. It's something for us to celebrate today and every day.

But ancient Rome was a different story. Your only real option for survival was to keep your head down and learn to live within the system—or pay dearly. At the time Paul wrote Romans, Nero was emperor. He hadn't gone to the dark side, yet. He would soon begin his brutal persecution of the church, however.

Finally, you'll notice Paul talks about all that's best in government in our passage—when it lives into its ideal of how God created things to be: commending the good, holding the bad accountable, administering justice for all, building roads, keeping society stable and peaceful, etc. Good governance is designed by God and a common grace for all humanity.

But it's important to note Paul doesn't mention what happens when the government or public servants don't do what they've been called to do. There are other Scriptures that address what to do in those situations—but not our passage this morning.

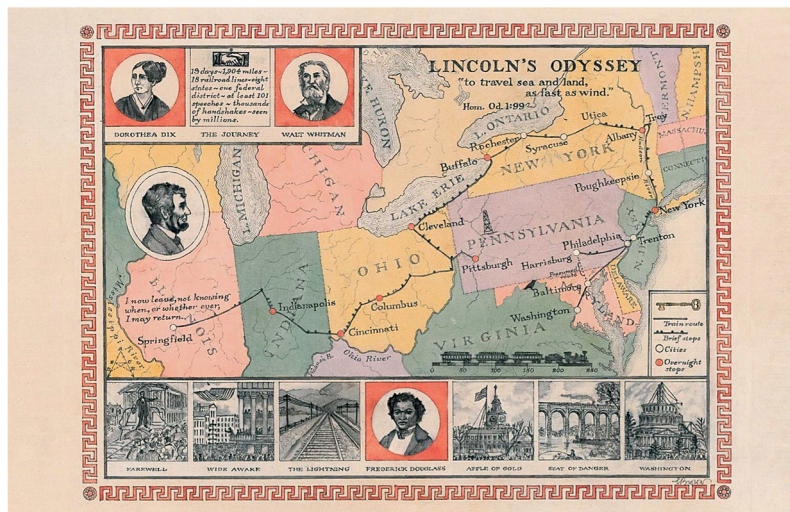
Let's hear the word of the Lord from ...

Scripture: Romans 13:1-7 (NRSV)

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you wish to have no fear of the authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval; for it is God's servant for your good. But if you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the sword in vain! It is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be subject, not only because of wrath but also because of conscience. For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, busy with this very thing. Pay to all what is due them—taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due.

*The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.*

SERMON – *Lifting High the Cross and Waving the Flag*



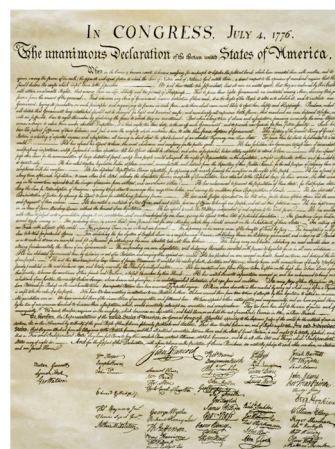
In Ted Widmer's excellent 2020 book "*Lincoln on the Verge*," he tells about Abraham Lincoln's stunning upset to become the next President of the United States. Alexander Stephens, a friend from Georgia, asked Lincoln to share a word that would help calm the waters of a nation that was beginning to unravel.

Stephens asked for a word that would speak to him in the crisis, quoting Proverbs 25:11 from the KJV, "A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in pictures of silver."

This was a chess game over the meaning of America, between two old friends who were on opposite sides of an ever-widening chasm between the North and the South over slavery.



Abraham Lincoln portrait, c. 1864



Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776

Lincoln began the rough draft of his response on a scrap of paper. The “apple of gold” was the sentence about equality in the *Declaration of Independence*. Lincoln continued to ponder, then scribble down more thoughts:

“That something is the principle of Liberty to all—the principle that clears the path for all, gives hope to all, and by consequence, enterprise, and industry to all.”

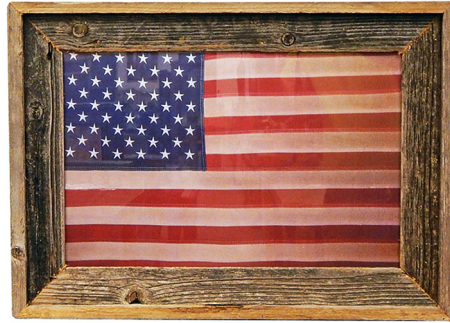
All men are created equal. To Lincoln “all meant all” and “equal meant equal.” This was the kernel of the message Lincoln would share in Philadelphia when he spoke at Independence Hall along his journey to Washington DC to be inaugurated.

Lincoln had long pondered the *Declaration of Independence* before becoming president. He sought “the inwardness of the thing.” Throughout the 1850’s Lincoln hammered away at the *Declaration* like a blacksmith, seeking what was most invaluable from it. He would repeat phrases from it:

“self-evident...” “all men are created equal...” “Creator...” “inalienable rights...”
“Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness...”

Sometimes it seemed as if the words of the *Declaration* would fill Lincoln up with oxygen. Friends noted he grew enlarged when he spoke them. Unlike so many cynical politicians of his day, Lincoln seemed to actually believe that the *Declaration of Independence*’s promises were true. That made him dangerous to a system that had grown quite comfortable with moral rot.

With leaders like Lincoln, our passage this morning makes sense. We trust his leadership and his judgment because he was looking after the entire country, and was willing to sacrifice everything for it, even his own life. He lived out the ideal for an American president.



So on this 4th of July, I'd like to share about how we can show our admiration for our country, contributing to it rather than detracting from it, in a way that honors God, honors our leaders, and honors our fellow countrymen.

Just a few verses before our morning's passage, Paul summons the Roman church and us to live at peace with everyone, as far as we can. And one way to do that is to pray for our country and pray for our leaders—no matter who is in office. Whether we like them or not, we pray for wisdom in their decision-making. We pray that all people in our country can live peaceful and quiet lives marked by godliness and dignity. It's our Christian duty. I like how Peter succinctly put it in his first letter:

- Honor everyone.
- Love the family of believers.
- Fear God.
- Honor the emperor.

I believe an important spiritual discipline is to respect leadership. In our passage, Paul says in essence being a good citizen is an expression of our love for God and God's order of things. It's spiritual to be a good, responsible, respectful citizen. We can't enjoy all the benefits government offers, and then refuse the responsibilities that come with it. In fact, Paul says in our passage that serving in government can be a way of carrying out God's call upon our lives as long as it's in keeping with God's plan for public servants. Fulfill your civic duties: pay your taxes and pay your bills. Serve faithfully in the military if you're called upon to do so. Be honest in your dealings.

Christians aren't absolved from living a life of courtesy, civility, and law-keeping of just laws. We need to obey the authorities to the fullest extent that our Christian conscience allows. The freedom we have in Christ is not a freedom to do whatever we want against those we disapprove or disagree with. We're accountable rather than free-floaters outside of society. Not only is our nation under God, we're under God too.

But here's the tricky part. There's no cut and dried, black and white litmus test for how far we obey authorities if we're compelled to do unjust or evil things. And to know what justice really is. Some Christians, in good conscience, go farther than others. We need grace and forbearance to allow for latitude. But there are limits.

No matter who we are, we can't have a mindless or uncritical obedience to our country or political party if we're to be truly faithful Christians. Our ultimate and highest allegiance is to God and God

alone. God's not only our Higher Power, God is the Highest Power. The cross is always held higher than the flag.

The Scriptures tell us the government's authority is a received authority, a delegated authority from God. So the State isn't equal to God, above God, or the same as God. Lifting high the cross is not the same thing as waving the flag. I have a friend who respectfully asked another friend not to mention politics when they would get together. The friend responded that she could not remain silent about her faith. Did you catch that? Politics became her faith. The two were blurred. For her, waving the flag WAS lifting high the cross.

Our politics must be informed by our faith, but it can never become our faith. Jesus' kingdom is on earth, but it's not of this earth. It's the Kingdom of Heaven—the Kingdom come—on earth, as it is in heaven.

The Scriptures tell us what equating the cross and the flag is called: Idolatry. Syncretism. These are poisonous to faith. This is a major problem, one of the major problems in the American church today. We need both. We can't throw away either in this life.

Jesus coaches us on how to keep the two separated and rightly ordered. Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's, and render unto God what is God's. Don't render unto Caesar what is God's. So we don't worship the state or the leader—that's reserved for God alone. In God we trust, not in Caesar we trust. So there are limits and accountability to the state. Our bulletin image reminds us—the flag is framed by God.

It is possible for the State to go beyond or exceed its special commission, and where it becomes the church, becomes God. Or it seeks to "replace God" as Karl Barth wrote in the Theological Declaration of Barmen where the state, *"become[s] the single and totalitarian order of human life, fulfilling the church's vocation as well."* Obedience to God is not the same thing as obedience to the State.

So we also show good citizenship by being the conscience of the nation, calling the State back to its proper role and calling Christians away from idolatry back to worship of the one true God. The book of Revelation does this when it challenges Rome calling it Babylon. The church was faithful when it prophetically challenged governments to reject:

- The anti-Semitism of the Third Reich
- Apartheid of South Africa
- The oppression of blacks and minorities in our country

The church has wrestled with this from the beginning. The early church father Origen described it this way:

Our senses—sight, sound, and thought—are given to us by God. But although we get them from God, what we do with them is up to us. However, this isn't free reign. We'll be held accountable if we've abused what God has given us to use for good. In the same way, the authorities will be judged by God if they haven't used the powers they've received from God for upholding God's laws.



And so, for Christians, being a good citizen is like the two sides of the one coin.

First, respect. This means praying for our leaders and country, carrying out our civic duties, honoring the laws of the land, paying our taxes, and contributing to the common good. This demonstration of respect for our country teaches us about the virtues of honor, duty, loyalty and sacrifice for others. We're a union and in solidarity together—not a house divided. It keeps us connected to and caring for our fellow Americans and all people. It also honors God.

Second, conscience. Christians also show their patriotism by holding the State accountable to truly seek "justice for all" and not take over the role of church or the role of God in society. We encourage our country to hold to our ideals and reject unjust laws in a non-violent and constructive (not destructive) manner.

Immanuel, this 4th of July and always, let us:

Lift high the cross. And wave the flag.

Amen.

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