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“Allegiance to Our King”

Setting the Stage

It was in December 2000 that then President-elect George Bush promised a Justice Department “*guided by principle, not by politics.*” Accompanying that statement, he nominated Sen. John Ashcroft, a staunch conservative who was later confirmed as Attorney General. Ashcroft's nomination was the most controversial appointment Bush made. Though opposition was fierce, there were some Democrats, such as Sen. Bob Torricelli of New Jersey, who defended Ashcroft because of his character: “*While John is decidedly conservative, he is also unquestionably a person of integrity and considerable ability.*”

A significant part of the problem came from comments that Ashcroft had made at Bob Jones University in 1999, which opponents believed rendered him unfit for the office of Attorney General. What did he say that was drawing such ire?

Unique among nations, America recognized the source of our character as being godly and eternal, not being civic and temporal... And because we have understood that our source is eternal, America has been different! We have no King but Jesus... There is a difference between a culture that has no king but Caesar, no standard but eh civil authority, and a culture that has no king but Jesus, no standard but the eternal authority... When you have no king but Jesus, you release the eternal, you release the highest and the best, you release virtue, you release potential. (<https://www.au.org/church-state/february-2001-church-state/featured/no-king-but-jesus>)

The editorial page of the same issue of the same journal opined, “*President Bush was elected as a “compassionate conservative,” not as a Religious Right standard bearer. If he forges ahead with his church-state agenda, he will meet determined opposition.*”

While acknowledging Ashcroft’s right to speak his opinions freely, the focus quickly became the issue of allegiance. The vast majority of Americans favor a healthy separation between church and state. Many even falsely believe the ‘wall of separation’ is in the Constitution. At the same time, most religious leaders appreciate the protection the First Amendment provides and the freedoms it has guaranteed. But the struggle for allegiance/loyalty and control continues.

For many of us who grew up in the United States of America, it was traditional to stand up at the beginning of each school and with hand over heart join in reciting “The Pledge of Allegiance” (Pledge). However, controversies surrounding students refusing to stand and recite the Pledge are not new. In fact, though the Pledge to the flag has been part of American life for generations, it has not been without personal and constitutional controversy.

Allow just a little history. Few people I have asked realize that the pledge was created by Francis Bellamy (an ordained minister) in 1892 to commemorate the 400th anniversary of Christopher Columbus’s arrival in the New World. Nor do they know that his version did not mention the words “under God”: “*I pledge allegiance to my flag and the Republic for which it stands—one Nation indivisible—with liberty and justice for all.*” The words “under God” did not come until 62 years later, when some people added the words “under God” to the Pledge and convinced President Dwight Eisenhower to sign a bill, which was passed by Congress, putting the words “under God” within the phrase “one nation indivisible.”

For self-identified ‘patriotic Americans,’ to say the Pledge is as natural as eating or breathing. It is done without thought and reflection. If they are questioned and are knowledgeable, they might point to *Elk Grove United School District v. Newdow*, the 2004 Supreme Court case in which Chief Justice William Rehnquist and Justices O’Connor and Thomas each wrote separate concurrences, stating that requiring teachers to lead the Pledge, despite the inclusion of the phrase, “under God,” was in fact constitutional. Opinions are certainly divided as to the ‘rights’ involved and the proper behavior for good citizens.

How do such issues – the belief that we have “no king but Jesus’ and that of “allegiance to the flag” – impact our daily lives as Christians? Many will quickly quote Romans 13:1 – “*Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.*” (ESV) – and suggest that there is no further discussion necessary. In the world of the early church and the Roman Empire, allegiance and loyalty to Caesar included being a participant in the “emperor cult.”

The question ever present during the early centuries of the church was this: Caesar or Christ? It was Domitian’s edict that made the question demonstrable, even visceral. Statues of him were sent all over the empire. On appointed days, feasts were held, and everyone had to pass before the cast image of Domitian and bow before him as god. It was truly clear! Caesar or Christ? Giving allegiance to Jesus as King and claiming citizenship in his kingdom was tantamount to denying one’s allegiance to Caesar.

Eventually the issue was drawn in the Roman Empire sharply between the “Lord Jesus” and “Lord Caesar.” It cost something then to say: “Jesus is Lord” (1 Cor. 12:3). Polycarp in the second century was given the alternative of life with the words “Lord Caesar” or death with the words “Lord Jesus.” He chose “Lord Jesus” and death, yes, and eternal life. Soon the Roman Empire was engaged in a death struggle between the kingdom of Caesar and the kingdom of Christ. Nero, Domitian, Trajan, Flavius, Decius threw the whole weight of the State against the pestiferous heresy to stamp it out. But it would not be stamped out.¹

The King and His Kingdom

“The story Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John tell is the story of *how God became king*—in and through Jesus both in his public career and in his death.”²

It is not uncommon to hear Christians state that their sole purpose in life is to make it to heaven when they die. N.T. Wright gives this as one of the “six different types of answers” people have proffered as to meaning and/or motivation behind the gospels: “The first inadequate answer is that Jesus came to teach people *how to go to heaven.*”³ A common result of this inadequate teaching is often that the Kingdom is also put off to some future, celestial (and therefore immaterial) realm that is “out there.”

Decades before Wright and others would begin to emphasize the importance of ‘the new creation,’ the teaching was present in leaders of the Stone-Campbell movement. For example,

¹ A. T. Robertson, *The New Citizenship: The Christian Facing a New World Order* (New York; Chicago; London; Edinburgh: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1919), 22–23.

² N.T. Wright, *How God Became King: The Forgotten Story of The Gospels* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2012), 175.

³ *Ibid.*, 41-42.

Alexander Campbell would opine “*The Bible begins with the generations of the heavens and the earth; but the Christian revelation ends with the regenerations or new Creation of the heavens and the earth.*”⁴ He would go on to speak about how “*the dead in Christ*” will also be regenerated in such a way that “*the bodies of the saints will be as homogeneous with the new earth and heavens as their present bodies are with the present heavens and earth.*” The foundation for his thinking is a new creation theology – that God “*re-creates, regenerates, but annihilates nothing.*”⁵

In his studies, John Mark Hicks has found that while the nineteenth century “Restorationists” often disagreed, the majority all agreed that the most important aspect of *the second coming* was “*the regeneration not only of the soul, but the body and the whole cosmos.*” He would support this with the words of Alexander Campbell,

They believed, as Alexander Campbell put it, that “the hope of the resurrection to everlasting life” in “the new earth and the new heavens” was essential to the Christian vision of life and hope, central to the gospel of grace itself (*Millennial Harbinger*, 1865, p. 494).⁶

Hicks defines this position as “the dominant perspective among churches of Christ in the late nineteenth century, particularly as articulated by David Lipscomb and James A. Harding, co-founders of the Nashville Bible School (now Lipscomb University).” The common belief was that God’s mission was to dwell again upon the earth just as in Eden and restore the full reign of God in the cosmos. The storyline is that creation—humanity and the cosmos (heaven and earth)—is lost through the fall, redeemed by the Son, and ultimately won and purified. Hicks provides two illuminating quotations from Lipscomb with reference to God’s dwelling on earth...

“David Lipscomb believed that eventually the “earth itself shall become heaven” (*Gospel Advocate*, 1903, 328).”

“When sin came into the world, God left this world as a dwelling place... He will again make this earth his dwelling place, but it will be only when sin has been purged out and it has been consecrated anew as the new haven and the new earth in which dwelleth righteousness.”

In other words, the ‘new creation’ will become God’s home. For Hicks (and I certainly agree), this is the story that should shape the mission of the church, as it did for both Lipscomb and Harding. The belief was that the process of redemption and renewal is ‘apocalyptic,’ that is, that which reveals... that which lifts the veil between heaven and earth and the revelation of God and his plan for the world. In this case, the future is in some sense already present, though its fullness is still in the future.

In terms of the Kingdom of God, this is the “now, and not yet.” We are called to live as citizens of the Kingdom of God, yielding our allegiance to King Jesus while, at the same time, living in anticipation of the ‘not yet.’ When this is not the case, the church fails to answer its

⁴ Alexander Campbell, *The Christian System: In Reference to the Union of Christians, and a Restoration of Primitive Christianity, as Plead in the Current Reformation*, 2nd Ed. (Nashville: Gospel Advocate Company, 1939, 1956), 257.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ <http://johnmarkhicks.com/2015/08/08/what-will-become-of-the-earth-a-nashville-bible-school-perspective/>

true calling. We are to pray “Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10, ESV). We live as if the future is already present.

Therefore, it seems that the question regarding our obedience (not submission) to “the governing authorities” (Romans 13:1) becomes a question of the foci of our allegiance and loyalty. Lipscomb believed that “The Christian owes no allegiance” to the civil powers but only “to God.”⁷ Our allegiance is to King Jesus as loyal citizens in his kingdom. And so, regarding the mission of the church, Lipscomb seemed to be clear at times:

The true mission of the Christian religion is to raise [humanity] above all these narrow, selfish, sectionalizing influences—to break down these middle walls of separation and strife erected by human selfishness, human ambition, and human wickedness, and to bind all the dissevered, broken, discordant and belligerent factions and fragments of Adam’s fallen and sinning family, irrespective of race, language or color, into one peaceable, fraternal and harmonious body in Christ.⁸

Toward an Understanding of Allegiance

When I originally submitted the title for this paper, my focus was to be on what follows. Saddened by the realization that many people have bifurcated issue regarding salvation and issues regarding discipleship I began to research the historical background of what has come to be known as the “faith only” movement. Yes, Martin Luther had strong feelings against the letter of James, and many follow Luther’s teaching. It should be remembered, first of all, that Luther did not believe that James was written by the brother of Jesus (who had risen to leadership in the church of Jerusalem), nor that it should be included in the Canon. In fact, in his own words, “*St. James’ epistle is really an epistle of straw, compared to the others, for it has nothing of the nature of the gospel about it.*”⁹

Yet, what James writes in 2:14-26 makes! How do you demonstrate your ‘faith’ apart from works? Many believe that James is offering a commentary on the Sermon on the Mount. If this is the case, James could be supporting the closing parable of the house built on the rock or the sand – emphasizing that we are to be those who “hears these words of mine and *does* them” (Matthew 7:24, ESV – emphasis mine).

Let me say that I believe the Paul when he writes “...by grace you have been saved” (Ephesians 2:5, ESV). There is no way that I, nor anyone else, could ever earn my salvation. However, I also am aware that in vv. 8-10 he goes on to write,

For by grace you have been saved *through faith*. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus *for good works*, which God prepared beforehand, that *we should walk in them*. (emphasis mine)

What does Paul clarify in v.8 when he adds “*through faith*”? There are many – even in the Stone-Campbell Movement – who contend that justification by faith alone is essential to the ‘gospel.’ Yet, when John was arrested, Jesus himself said, “*The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel*” (Mark 1:15, ESV). The Greek

⁷ David Lipscomb, “Reply to Bro. Lipscomb’s Long Articles on Politics and Voting,” *Gospel Advocate* 18.32 (August 17, 1876) 799. [As quoted by John Mark Hicks.]

⁸ David Lipscomb, “The Advocate and Sectionalism,” *Gospel Advocate* 8.18 (May 1, 1866) 275.

⁹ See Luther’s Works, vol. 35, Word and Sacrament I (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1960), 395–97.

word translated believe is πιστεύετε (*pisteuete*), which is a 2nd person, plural, imperative verb from the *pistis* family. So, is it possible that the English word ‘faith’ is not even the best word to translate both Paul’s clarification and Jesus’ statement? Is Paul’s clarification that ‘grace’ is God’s part and ‘faith’ is our response... not meaning just cognitive *believing* (the so-called verbal activity of faith) but something like faithfulness/allegiance/loyalty?

Let me highly recommend three books at this point. The first two are written by Matthew W. Bates: *Gospel Allegiance: What Faith in Jesus Misses for Salvation in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2019) and his earlier work *Salvation by Allegiance Alone: Rethinking Faith, Works, and the Gospel of Jesus the King* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017). The third book, written by Teresa Morgan is *Roman Faith and Christian Faith: Pistis and Fides in the Early Roman Empire and Early Churches* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

Briefly, what my study has led me to believe is confirmed in the more exhaustive study by Morgan and supported in a scholarly, yet straightforward manner by Bates. We are not saved by the knowledge that we possess between our ears. James says, “Even the demons believe—and shudder!” (James 2:19, ESV). In fact, throughout the gospels it is the demons who know and correctly identify Jesus (see Matthew 8:29; Mark 1:34; 3:11; 5:7). What does the word often translated *faith* or *belief* mean?

When we look up the word *pistis* in the most authoritative dictionary that covers the New Testament era [Frederick W. Danker’s *Greek / English Lexicon*], we find something interesting. The glosses under the first definition do not mention faith *in* something at all; rather, they pertain to the quality something possesses that evokes faith or trust in another: *faithfulness, reliability, fidelity, and commitment*.¹⁰

Shifting his focus, Bates goes on to show how our social and cultural settings allow us to apply the ‘meaning’ we have for a word in different situations. Yet, for both Bates and Morgan, the relational aspects of *pistis* are significant –

We discover that *pistis* is used to describe relationships between generals and soldiers, kings and subjects, patrons and clients, masters and slaves, friends, family members, and lovers, and even one’s relationship with the self.¹¹

Pistis and *fides* are fundamentally relational concepts and practices, centring [sic] on trust, trustworthiness, faithfulness, and good faith before broadening out to the ‘deferred’ and ‘reified’ meanings... Following the weight of usage, we approached *pistis* in the New Testament first as a relationship (or nexus of relationships) which shapes a community (or communities) in various ways in different writings. By focusing on the relationality of *pistis* and its role in the shaping of communities, this study has taken a rather different approach from those strands of tradition which, following Augustine, divide *pistis/fides* into that which takes place in the heart and mind of the believer and that which the believer believes in.¹²

Allegiance to Our King

It is the contention of this paper that Matthew Bates has correctly identified what he, in fact, strongly emphasizes as “Christianity’s largest problem today.” In fact, he believes that “it is not

¹⁰ Bates, *Gospel Allegiance*, 61.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 67

¹² Morgan, *Roman Faith and Christian Faith*, 503

an overstatement to say that the largest problem within Christianity today is the exclusion of Jesus's kingship from the gospel."¹³ Supporting this claim, Bates points out how "Christ" is often treated as just the last name of Jesus, instead of as a kingly title.

Maybe R.C. Bell, was not only accurate in his assessment of the state of the church during the first half of the 20th century, but also prophetic regarding what was to come. Hicks assessment of Bell is that Bell saw how the church was increasingly aligning itself with 'patriotic nationalism', as well as adopting many of the cultural patterns of the nation.¹⁴ Bell's opinion was that the church had become very mechanical. In the words of Hicks, "Faith was no longer a dynamic life empowered by the Spirit that envisioned the kingdom of God but conformity to an ecclesial blueprint."¹⁵ Which begs the question, have we also lost the relational aspects of living in allegiance to our King Jesus while affirming that we are 'non-denominational, locally autonomous, Bible believing' churches?

Again, 'thanks' is due to the research and a post by John Mark Hicks, which included Bell's autobiographical sketch of 1951 ("A Lifetime Spent in Christian Education"). More than once, Bell refers to the failure of Christians to be about the task of 'sanctification.' Bell believed that what the church needed was a return to the 1st century perspective – "to save [it] from changing divine dynamics to human mechanics."¹⁶ He understood that it is not just what we believe ('faith only'), but also involves us being about the task of sanctification... being "doers of the word." In this sketch, Bell writes,

When Christians fail to make use of the sanctifying portion of Christianity, as though it were an optional adjunct instead of the built-in essential which it is, they harden into harsh, unloving, unloved, self-sanctifying, unlawful legalists and defeated Pharisees, biting and devouring one another as the Galatians were doing (Gal. 5:13-15).¹⁷

Is it possible, as Hicks maintains, that there has been a "loss of pacifism, kenotic service, kindness and gentleness as well as the opposition to evil cultural forms" due to what he also describes as "the loss of Lipscomb and Harding's apocalyptic vision"?¹⁸

The relationship between salvation and sanctification is developed in the following somewhat lengthy quote from Matthew Bates:

Any gospel that makes discipleship optional or additional is a false gospel. Gospel allegiance helps us to understand why faith in Jesus, discipleship, and obedience to his commands go hand in hand... We are not saved by adherence to an enumerated list of commands that Jesus promulgates as king—as if we could be saved by perfectly keeping the Golden Rule, the principles of the Sermon on the Mount, or some other system, like the Ten Commandments. We are saved by allegiance to him as we are led by the Spirit (rather than rule systems) into obedience to his commands.

¹³ Bates, *Gospel Allegiance*, 98

¹⁴ <http://johnmarkhicks.com/2019/06/12/extending-the-kingdom-theology-of-lipscomb-and-harding/>

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ R.C. Bell, "Honor to Who Honor is Due," *Firm Foundation* 68 (November 6, 1951), 6.

¹⁷ <http://johnmarkhicks.com/2011/03/07/r-c-bell-a-lament-over-a-theological-shift-among-churches-of-christ/>

¹⁸ Hicks, "Extending the Kingdom Theology"

For the Spirit allows us to produce good works pleasing to him. This is not salvation by works, but by loyal discipleship or embodied allegiance.¹⁹

Let me conclude by returning to the where the introduction – the discussion regarding the Pledge. There is much disagreement, even among conservative Christians, as to whether a Christian should pledge allegiance to anything other than God. You will remember my earlier quote from David Lipscomb that allegiance is owed to no civil powers, but only to God. There is much to be gained by reading a truly short post by John Mark Hicks titled “Pledging Allegiance to the Messiah’s Kingdom—The Lord’s Prayer” (September 12, 2019). He begins the post by asserting, “The Sermon on the Mount is the epitome of Kingdom ethics and discipleship.”²⁰ Hicks goes on to identify what many refer to as ‘The Lord’s Prayer’ (Matthew 6:9-13) as “a model prayer for kingdom people.”

Historically speaking, from late in the first century, there were disciples of Jesus who were praying the prayer three times a day, as instructed in the *Didache* 8:1-11.²¹ From Hicks perspective, the prayer “functions not only as a petition for God’s care,” it also functions “as a daily pledge of allegiance.” He continues,

In the first half of the prayer, we commit ourselves to the transcendent God. We pledge allegiance to the divine name, will, and kingdom. We have no other allegiance. This is the heart of worship itself—a loyalty that transcends everything else in our lives and orders the whole of our lives under God’s reign. Anything else is idolatry.²²

We are living in a day in which civil unrest threatens our normal routines; where what might have previously been a safe stroll through the downtown streets of a major city is highly questionable behavior; where there are legitimate questions regarding obedience to all of the demands of the governing authorities. Though questions have risen regarding not only the wording, but even saying the Pledge, we have a prayer that “is not simply about our allegiance to God, but it is also a testimony of God’s commitment (yes, even allegiance) to us.”²³ I will use a portion of Hick’s closing paragraph to conclude this paper as well:

The Lord’s Prayer, prayed daily with purpose and commitment, will transform us. Through this prayer, we acknowledge God’s transcendence, commit ourselves to God’s agenda, and embrace a new way of living in the world that conforms to God’s will, honor God’s name, and manifest God’s kingdom... Through this prayer, we pledge our allegiance to God, and remember God’s pledge to us.²⁴

¹⁹ Bates, *Gospel Allegiance*, 224.

²⁰ <http://johnmarkhicks.com/2019/09/12/pledging-allegiance-to-the-messiahs-kingdom-the-lords-prayer/>

²¹ <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/didache-lightfoot.html>

²² Hicks, “Pledging Allegiance”

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.