I Pledge Allegiance …

Week before was VBS. I love VBS! The kid in me comes out and I have a blast. I so enjoy sharing Jesus with our children. Did I say that I love VBS?

I have been doing Bible School for nearly 50 years now. I have had major roles and sometimes no role at all, but I have loved it nonetheless.

This year I took my place at the opening session. If you are a veteran of VBS you know what is involved in the opening ceremonies … the pledges.

I want us to do what our kids did every day in VBS. Let’s stand and go through our pledges.

First we face the American flag, put your hand over your heart, and pledge: “I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, and to the republic for which it stands, one nation under God, with liberty and justice for all.”

Then we face the Christian flag, put your hand over your heart and pledge: “I pledge allegiance to the Christian flag and to the Savior for whose kingdom it stands, one brotherhood uniting all mankind in service and in love.”

Finally we face the upheld Bible, put your hand over your heart, and pledge: “I pledge allegiance to the Bible, God’s Holy Word, I will make it a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path and will hide its words in my heart that I might not sin against God. Amen.”

I have done that for nearly half a century with pride and joy. But something struck me odd this year. Maybe I am getting old and cynical. Maybe I have grown more disillusioned over the changes in our government. Or maybe Holy Spirit was prompting my spirit with His grief. I sensed in the depths of my heart, “Aren’t we doing this all wrong?”

I mean, shouldn’t our pledge (if we have one at all) be first and foremost to God and His Word? When you think about it, shouldn’t the Bible be pledged first, then the Christian flag, and then the American flag?

Historically the Christian flag and its pledge are the youngest, both coming into being at the turn of the 20th century. [The Christian Flag was first conceived on September 26, 1897, at Brighton Chapel on Coney Island in Brooklyn, New York. The superintendent of a Sunday school, Charles C. Overton, gave an impromptu lecture to the gathered students, because the scheduled speaker had failed to arrive for the event. He gave a speech asking the students what a flag representing Christianity would look like. Overton thought about his improvised speech for many years afterward. In 1907, he designed and began promoting the flag. Soon thereafter, Lynn Harold Hough, a Methodist minister wrote the first pledge. He had heard the Secretary to the Methodist Young People's Missionary Movement, promoting the Christian flag at a rally. It was written for his youth to recite. Both the concept of the flag and the pledge caught on after that.]

Our American flag originated with our fight for independence, but is less than 250 years old.

The Bible is ancient, thousands of years old, and the pledge to it is right out of its ageless words. VBS is about teaching the Bible to our kids! We are told, “So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.” (Rom. 10:17) It is why we do VBS in the first place!

All this got me musing, which can be dangerous, I admit. Where are our loyalties? To what … or to whom should we pledge our allegiance? I mean, shouldn’t God be first, then His Kingdom, and then our nation? What does the Bible say about this?

Now that got me a bit upset. As you know, I am a die-hard patriot. The flag makes me cry when it passes by. Old Glory flying high in a stiff breeze is a sight to behold! It stirs me deeply. It is a part of who I am.

But what place does allegiance to my nation play in relation to God Almighty, to His Word, and to His Kingdom? In Boy Scouts they have a badge that is called “God and Country.” Shouldn’t that be the order?
Our national flag is a symbol. It means so much to us, historically and personally. All of our veterans have served, some have fought and many died under those colors. It is a symbol of freedom, of our nation, of our values, and a whole lot more.

Our Christian flag is a symbol also. As stated in the pledge, it stands for Christ and His Kingdom.

At a time when our nation (symbolized by our flag) has taken such unbiblical and unchristian stances, where does our allegiance lie? How do we are Christ followers balance love of country and love of Jesus? What does the Bible say about our citizenship and our role as a citizen?

God made that clear in the Ten Commandments, "You shall have no other gods before me." (Exodus 20:3) Some religious groups see the American flag as an idol. I am not suggesting that.

Satan offered Jesus all the world had to offer. "Again the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor, and he said to him, 'All these things I will give to you ... ' Jesus said to him Satan! For it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only God.'" (Matt 3:8-10)

The United States is a kingdom of this world! It has great splendor, power, and wealth. I cannot imagine Jesus succumbing to the temptation to place loyalty to this country, no matter how great it is perceived to be, above, equal to, or anywhere near His loyalty to God and the heavenly kingdom.

The writer of Hebrews stated: "But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; for He has prepared a city for them." (Hebrews 11:16)

Matthew 22:15-22 is probably the best answer to our question. Jesus was being questioned about loyalty to Rome. The “tax” referred to here is not like our income tax. It was tribute tax to Caesar. Annually citizens had to bow before the sovereign lord Caesar and announce their loyalty to him. The tribute tax was their obeisance to him. That is the context of Jesus reply, “Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and unto God the things that are God’s.”

We owe certain allegiance to our nation and should readily give to America what it is due. We are to be good, model, and tax paying citizens. But there is a limit to that allegiance. As Thomas Jefferson wrote in one of his historic letters, there needs to be that separation of church and state.

The Jews of Jesus’ days were under the dominion of Rome. Jesus had something both historic and prophetic to say about national images and rites performed in holy places. “So when you see the ‘abomination of desolation,’ spoken of by Daniel the prophet, standing where it ought not” (let the reader understand), “then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains.” (Mk. 13:14)

Historically that referred to 167 B.C. when a Greek ruler by the name of Antiochus Epiphanies set up an altar to Zeus over the altar of burnt offerings in the Jewish temple in Jerusalem. He also sacrificed a pig on the altar in the Temple in Jerusalem. This historical event was known as the abomination of desolation.

In fulfillment of the prophesy in Daniel, Jesus stated plainly that the Antichrist will likewise desecrate the Temple in the Great Tribulation. In both situations, symbols of nationalism and government-sanctioned religion desecrated or would desecrate the holy place of God.

Now I am NOT calling the American flag a desecration in the Lord’s house. Don’t get me wrong. What I am saying is that symbols of nationalism had no place in the Jewish Temple. It was considered a desecration. The question remains as to whether or not symbols of American government should be present in a Baptist church sanctuary.

Paul wrote, “For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ ...” (Phil 3:20) When you study the New Testament, you will find that we are at best ambassadors on the earth and here in the U. S. That is how Paul described us; ambassadors of Christ. “Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ’s behalf, be reconciled to God.” (2 Cor. 4:20) As ambassadors of Jesus Christ, living on assignment in the United States, we are God’s voice pleading with Americans to come to Christ.
Our home is in heaven and we are here on assignment as representatives of our King and His Kingdom.

I know that is hard to grasp. Heaven and the Kingdom of God seem to be so ethereal, otherworldly and maybe only symbolic to most Christians. However citizenship here on Earth is obvious, practical, and very material. We may pay tithes toward heaven but we pay taxes on earth!

Is earth much more “home” to us than heaven? Are we more at home here than where we are from and where we are going? Is this temporary abiding place more real than where we are headed? And more pointed, what does that mean as to where our loyalties lay? Are we first and foremost Americans or Christians?

Most of us have stepped into the unintentional and idolatrous trap of equating the Kingdom of God with America. We see the church of America as the hope of the world, the center of Christianity, and it is NOT. As a matter of fact, church in America is much more secularized than in other countries. Are the terms “Christian” and “American” synonymous? Are all Americans Christians? Are all Christians Americans? No to both!

Let me ask you a question. Would Jesus approve of the Roman government flying their flag (called a standard back then) in the Jewish temple? Let me put it another way, when we get to heaven, will the American flag be beside the pearly gates? NO! Our faith knows no nationality!

No nation is equivalent to the Kingdom of God. Quite to the contrary, the Kingdom transcends all nations. “After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, with palm branches in their hands ...” (Rev. 7:9) Christ’s Kingdom transcends all nations of all time!

Is that why I was bothered in my spirit about the pledges and the order they are traditionally in? Did it poke at my broken heart over decisions made by our nation’s leaders of late? Did it stir my soul because I sense that my nation has fallen from its foundation and lost its roots? Maybe it questioned my misplaced loyalty to my nation first and then to God.

We have learned to look to the government to uphold our values and morality. We have expected our elected officials to make laws that would protect our Judeo-Christian ethics. We have looked to them to do much of what Jesus left for the church to do. We have misplaced our hope in government!

But we now live in a post-Christian America. Our leaders do not hold dear what our Founding Fathers did. This is not our Founding Fathers nation anymore. Just this week in the Christian Index there was an article about how most Christians in America do NOT consider this a Christian nation anymore! (http://christianindex.org/less-half-americans-say-country-christian-nation/)

Listen to me, please! We can’t pass enough laws to fix what is wrong in America today. We can’t elect enough politicians to fix what is wrong in our nation. There is no political solution to the decadence in our land.

If we can learn anything from our Jewish ancestors, can we not discover that more and more laws will not produce righteousness? The Law never was the answer … but the Gospel is! Christians have surrendered the mantle of prophecy for the porridge of political rule. The Children of Israel surrendered the rule of God for the rule of a king. That didn’t end well, did it? Today the Church has abandoned the theocracy of God for the democracy of man.

In no way do I want to abandon our nation. I am in no way insinuating that we should give up on our government. But we must be the change agents that we were called to be or our nation will fail.

If there is something rotten in America it is because the salt has lost its savor. The salt is no longer salty. It is no longer forestalling the decay of society. It is no longer the preservative it was meant to be.

If there is darkness in our nation, it is because the light of God has been hidden under the bushel of the church roof. Someone has snuffed out the light. Christians have isolated themselves in their houses of worship, battened down the hatches, boarded up the windows, and taken on a survivalist mentality. The light and the salt are shut up in our churches!
Let me give you a principle right out of physics. Darkness is not more powerful than light. It never has been and never will be. The tiniest light drives back the darkness.

When you walk into a room and throw on the light switch, you hear a pop or see a surge of light and then darkness. What do you say to your wife? “Honey, the darkness has overcome the light bulb again.” No! You say, “The light has blown! It’s out!” You don’t declare a victory for darkness! Darkness has not driven back the light. Rather the light has failed! Darkness is the absence of light. What do you do in that situation? You don’t curse the darkness; you put in a new light bulb.

If it is dark in America it is because the light has gone out, and no one has cared enough to replace it. Oh, I’m wrong in saying that! Yes it has been replaced. With moral relativism and situational ethics and no absolute truths. Our light has been replaced with a smorgasbord of artificial light and marginal truisms.

I will fight and die for religious freedom for all people. That is a basic tenet of our Baptist Faith and Message. But we are swearing allegiance to a nation that is systematically marginalizing Christians! Every whim of religion is protected and given sanction … except Christianity. I am not a prophet nor am I the son of a prophet, but I see the day coming when to stand for the cause of Christ will bring painful persecution in our land.

But that must not cause us to run and hide, or to shut up and stand aside. Rather it should make us all the more bold to fly the right standard over our lives … to pledge allegiance to the Lamb of God and His forever kingdom. Heaven and earth will pass away (and that includes America, my friends) but God and His Kingdom are forever.

Who do you belong to? Whose are you? Who bought you with the price of His blood? Who gave Himself that you might have life? Whose Kingdom do you belong to? Where does your allegiance lie?

I love my nation and I grieve for America. I will not give up on her. But neither will I worship before the altar that is being fashioned in our land. My pledge will be to the Holy Triune God and the Kingdom He is bringing. I will pray as Jesus taught me, “Thy kingdom come, they will be done on earth as it is in heaven!”

Some years ago Ray Boltz wrote a song that embodies my heart right now. He has fallen into disrepute but the truth of his song stands.

I pledge allegiance to the Lamb
With all my strength, with all I am
I will seek to honor His commands
I pledge allegiance to the Lamb
I have heard how Christians long ago
Were brought before a tyrants throne
They were told that he would spare their lives
If they would renounce the name of Christ
But one by one, they chose to die
The Son of God, they would not deny
Like a great angelic choir sings
I can almost hear their voices ring
I pledge allegiance to the Lamb
With all my strength, with all I am
I will seek to honor His commands
I pledge allegiance to the Lamb
Now, the years have come and the years have gone
And the 'cause of Jesus still goes on
Now, our time has come to count the cost
To reject this world, to embrace the Cross
And one by one let us live our lives
For the One who died to give us life
Till the trumpet sounds on the final day
Let us gladly stand and boldly say
I pledge allegiance to the Lamb
With all my strength, with all I am
I will seek to honor His commands
I pledge allegiance to the Lamb
    To the Lamb of God who bore my pain
    Who took my place, who wore my shame
    I will seek to honor His commands
    I pledge allegiance to the Lamb
I pledge allegiance to the Lamb
With all my strength, with all I am
I will seek to honor His commands
I pledge allegiance to the Lamb

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mECQOt2z7mw