

The Pledge of Allegiance: Harmless Patriotism or Dangerous Idolatry?

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It was an extremely important occasion. All the officials from every level of government in the mighty Babylonian empire had assembled on the plain of Dura. An imperial edict had been issued and the patriotic politicians had gathered in response to their pontiff's plea. They were ignorant of the facts behind the event. They did not know that the golden idol that towered above them was a blatant symbol of rebellion against a heavenly scheme. The pagan Nebuchadnezzar had been privileged to receive a visit from the God of the universe who had revealed the future to him (Dan 2:1-45). However, rather than trust in God's providence, the Babylonian king attempted to avert the inevitable as he constructed a statue that defiantly indicated the permanence of his empire.

And so the privileged citizens gathered, completely unaware of the implications of their blinded nationalism. All that concerned them was the fact that Babylon was an unrivaled power in the world. Egypt and Assyria had had their day, and now military and economic supremacy belonged to the land that provided refuge for the only two surviving rivers from Eden. Not everyone in the congregated assembly had Babylonian family lineage. Many were naturalized citizens or resident aliens who had been abducted from foreign lands and assimilated into the Babylonian society.¹ Nonetheless, they had benefitted from the system and although the government had been responsible for destroying their homeland, they felt a strange sense of allegiance to this lamb like beast.

The orders were pretty straightforward: "When the trumpet is sounded, every person must fall prostrate before the golden idol."² Remember, this was not a call

¹Daniel 1:3-5. For a thorough discussion on the people of Babylon see A. L. Oppenheim, "Assyria and Babylonia," *Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible I* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 264-66.

²R. K. Harrison, *Old Testament Times* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 271-72, suggests that this call to public worship indicates a deviation from the secret rituals normally associated with pagan worship.

to *idolatry* in the pure sense of the term.³ In Daniel 3:9, the distinction is drawn between “serving the Babylonian gods” and “bowing to the golden image.”⁴ This idol did not bear the name of a pagan god. It had not been created in the mold of the golden calf or the baals and ahserim of Israel’s ancient enemies. This was not the defeated Dagon who had crumbled before the Philistines. It was not a representative of the menacing Marduk or the mysterious Ahura-Mazda. No, the summons was not an invitation to worship a symbol of recognized divinity, but a call for allegiance to a state. It was a call to unhindered patriotism.⁵ The idol was supposed to represent the impregnable kingdom of Babylon—a multi-ethnic empire⁶ that flourished in the arts and was technologically advanced;⁷ a well fortified state with the best military in the world. This golden tower indicated the spirit of Babylon.

Knowing that his administrators included those who would not consciously bow to a foreign god, Nebuchadnezzar had created an image that bore the semblances of neutrality. It had no name and claimed no portion of heaven or earth as its jurisdiction. It was not responsible for warfare, famine, rain, or vegetation. This was an idol that represented an ideal. This was the personification of Babylon, the greatest kingdom on earth. I’m sure it saw evidence of its greatness in the fact that it did not annihilate its captors like previous empires, but allowed them to assimilate into the kingdom. The empire of Babylon was the melting pot of the ancient world.

³John J. Collins, *Daniel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 183, notes, “Obesiance to the idol at the king’s command would, no doubt, imply an affirmation of loyalty to the king.” See also discussion in *ibid.*, 181 f.

⁴Daniel L. Smith-Christopher, *The Book of Daniel The New Interpreters Bible 7* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 63, points out that the Hebrew *segad* of 3:7 is better translated “do honor” than “worship.” In fact, in verse 9, *pelah* is used to denote worship of the gods, and in 2:46, *segad* is used to describe Nebucahdnezzar’s homage to Daniel.

⁵According to Pliny in his report to Trajan, early Christians were given a similar test of loyalty when asked to bow to a statue of the emperor. See Klaus Wengst *Pax Romana and the Peace of Jesus Christ* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1987), 50.

⁶Temper Longman III, *Daniel* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 98, suggests: “The various categories of people in the list are political officials from around the empire, which may signal that this was Nebuchadnezzar’s attempt to solidify control over the diverse elements of his vast empire.”

⁷See T. Jacobsen, “Babylon (OT),” *Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible I* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 334-38.

Africans, Europeans, and Asians lived together under the same rule of law. The culture was infused with the exotic sounds, tastes, and smells of distant lands. This is what the mighty statue represented—the foundation of a new world order where Babylon reigned supreme.

Those privileged with Babylonian citizenship undoubtedly felt that their nation was worthy of adulation. Their young men were known for their scientific prowess. The hanging gardens in the midst of the city was heralded as one of the seven wonders in the ancient world. This was not a backwards country like the neighboring Assyria or Israel. The citizens compared themselves with those in other countries and felt proud to be Babylonians. They never once questioned how Babylon had achieved its greatness. They never once reflected on the fact that other societies and cultures had to be pillaged and destroyed in order for Babylon to attain her esteem.

With the combined national adrenalin running high, it was no surprise that as soon as the orchestra began to play, the tens of thousands who had gathered on the Plain of Dura fell prostrate in concert. Old and young assumed the position of begging canines as they paid patriotic homage to their land. Although the Bible does not stipulate it, I assume that the orchestra probably performed the Babylonian national anthem. As the melody permeated the air, the emotions were evoked in the civic worshipers as they kissed the ground with tear filled eyes—pledging eternal allegiance to a land whose days were numbered.⁸

It is hard to resist the pressure when an entire nation is ravaged with nationalistic fever. I'm sure there were many silent objectors on the Plain of Dura who would have much rather been engaged in their favorite pastime.⁹ Some may even have felt foolish bowing down and groveling in front of a piece of polished metal. Among the crowd were many Sons of Israel who had been taken into captivity with other Jews from the Southern Kingdom.¹⁰ They were familiar with

⁸The political implications of the three Hebrews' refusal to bow to the image is also recognized by John E. Goldingay, *Daniel* (Waco: Word, 1989), 72: "...the story presupposes contexts where some Jews attain positions of responsibility in the state, and have to face the question of where lie the limits to the acceptance of their authority."

⁹Now that the national fervor over the fallaciously named "Operation Iraqi Freedom" has dwindled, formerly silent politicians are voicing their objections to George W. Bush's transparent imperialistic agenda.

¹⁰This deduction is based on the fact that the educated elite had been brought to Babylon from Judea to work in various governmental positions (Dan 1:3-5), and all government officials were present for the ceremony (Dan 3:2). L. J. Wood, *A Commentary*

the Lord's commandments and understood that even though this image was not intended to represent a divinity, it was indeed a graven image. They knew that bowing down to this symbol meant turning their backs on God.¹¹ However, as they looked at the military guards stationed in strategic positions around the Plain, they feared for their safety. They forgot the promise penned by David who declared, "The angel of the Lord camps around those who fear Him, and he delivers them" (Psalm 34:7). They forgot the Shemah which declared that there is only one Yahweh. They forgot their professed identity as children of the living God who had declared loyalty to the Divine theocracy. And as they looked around and saw everybody else bowing down, they decided to do the same.

Such compromising by professed people of God is not limited to the plains of Durah. Throughout every age, many who declare piety in times of peace and prosperity, are exposed in times of peril and persecution. During the Greek Empire, many Jewish males sought to reverse the marks of circumcision in order to escape Greek ridicule. Alleged Christians during the Roman Empire deliberately introduced pagan elements into Christianity in order to make the Christian faith more palatable to the oppressive government. More recently, during Hitler's quest to invigorate national pride in bankrupt Germany through his Dritte Reich, Christian churches rallied behind the megalomaniac, blasphemously citing scripture to justify their blinded loyalty. In his early days, before he started interring Jews, even the Seventh-day Adventist church applauded Hitler simply because he advocated vegetarianism. I repeat, many professed Christians have cowered under confrontation and bowed to the image of nationalism.

Admittedly, there are not many cultures left in which people will express their allegiance to their nations by falling prostrate on the ground. In our society, the way in which people bow to the image is much more sophisticated. When compared to

on Daniel (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973), 84, also believes that other Jews were present at the event. However, there are some who disagree based on a perceived textual silence (e.g. Longman, 99). In his analysis of Adventist interaction with the government of the United States, Douglas Morgan, *Adventist and the American Republic* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2001), 124-67, speaks of the "flexible wall" of compromise with the state that has been violated by Adventist leaders.

¹¹In the introduction to his guided study on the interfacing of the church with civil religion, Paul Minear, *I Pledge Allegiance: Patriotism and the Bible* (Philadelphia: Geneva Press, 1975), 16, asks, "At what point does the worship of country defy the First Commandment of the Decalogue (Deut. 5:7)? At what point does our ethnicity as Americans destroy our catholicity as Christians? In what ways are we today guilty of idolatry, apostasy, betrayal of our comrades in Christ and desertion of their faith?"

the elaborate image of gold in Babylon, our symbol of national pride appears to be harmless. For some, it may seem nonsensical to expect a decorated piece of fabric to evoke the same kind of awe that drove grown men to their knees on the plain of Dura. However, anyone who has been to an event that is preceded by the national invocation to the “Star Spangled Banner” is forced to admit that the power lies *behind* the symbol.¹² When the music starts and the assembly automatically turns to the location of the flag, hardened soldiers who have just massacred innocent women and children begin to cry like babies.¹³ Those who pledge allegiance, may not prostrate themselves like the worshipers in Babylon, but they share the same attitude and sentiments.¹⁴

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego had no delusions about the implications of bowing to the image. Although the 90 feet structure towered menacingly above them, they recalled that it was a mere ant in the presence of the God who towers above the heavens and the earth. Although they knew that those who refused to bow would immediately receive the death penalty and be thrown into a fiery furnace, they understood that all those who worshiped the beast and his image will be thrown into the unquenchable lake of fire and brimstone. Although they felt every eye of the gullible worshipers affixed on them, they knew these human eyes were outnumbered by the angelic eyes in the heavenly courts. With this firm assurance entrenched in their hearts, when the imperial orchestra transmitted its harmonious melodies throughout the airwaves and all those around them fell prostrate before the

¹²For a brief summary on the interpretive evolution of the pledge from its apparent neutral beginnings as a hastily drawn up patriotic statement to a nationally mandated religious confession, see Jeffrey Owen Jones, “The Pledge’s Creator,” *Smithsonian* 34, 8 (Nov, 2003), 113 ff. See also brief discussion on “the semireligious pattern of saying the pledge” in Gary Wills, *Under God: Religion and American Politics* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990), 80f.

¹³In their commentary on the intolerance of American Civil Religion, Robert Jewett and Lawrence Shelton Lawrence, *Captain America and the Crusade Against Evil* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 295, speak of “...the effort to link God and the nation through symbolic sacralization and compulsory ritual.”

¹⁴For an informed discussion on the sanctifying of the United States flag in particular and national symbols in general, see chapter in Jewett and Lawrence, “Crusades against Symbolic Desecration,” 294-312. The chapter ends with a polemical paraphrase of Amos 5:21 and 24 aimed at all nations: “I hate, I despise your flags, and take no delight in your patriotic ceremonies.... But let justice roll down like waters.”

image, these three soldiers for Yahweh remained erect.

This was no easy feat for the three Hebrew men. They were in a strange land with no embassy to protect them. They did not have the luxury of diplomatic immunity. They could not appeal to the Supreme Court. Nebuchadnezzar had absolute power and his word was irrevocable law. When the three servants of God refused to pledge allegiance to the symbol of national identity, they knew that their earthly days were numbered.

As we assess the relevance of this portion of the story and compare it to our situation, we are reminded that all those who refuse to pledge allegiance to this great nation are also in danger of facing the fiery furnace.¹⁵ When Martin Luther King, Jr., frustrated by the government's lack of enthusiasm to bring about true equality, wrote one of his final sermons entitled, "Why America is Going to Hell," he knew that the trained bullet of an alleged CIA sniper would soon take his life.¹⁶ When Mohammed Ali refused to be pressed into the United States army and become a mercenary for a nation that treated his people like dogs, he knew he would have to face jail and be stripped of his heavyweight boxing title. When representative Barbara Lee of California cast the sole vote against the United States' decision to invade defenseless and innocent Afghanistan, she knew that her political career would be thrown into the fiery furnace. In fact, more recently, the government authorized the interrogation of all Iraqi citizens and residents of the United States, and all who oppose the US and British aggression against their

¹⁵Haig Bosmajian, "From 'I Pledge Allegiance...' to 'Are You a Member of...?'" in *The Freedom Not to Speak* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 104-109, summarizes some of the opinions from *Minersville School District vs. Gobitis* (1940), a case stemming from a 1935 incident in Pennsylvania when Lillian and Walter Gobitis, two Jehovah's Witness children, refused to salute the flag on the basis that the pledge violates the Ten Commandments. After the school board upheld the mandatory flag-salute, a United States district court decided against it in 1937. However, the 1940 Supreme Court voted 8-1 to reverse the decision of the district court, claiming that the pledge of allegiance was a civic duty. Justice Frankfurter, who wrote for the majority stated, "The mere possession of religious convictions which contradict the relevant concerns of a political society does not relieve the citizen from the discharge of political responsibilities." Cited in *ibid.*, 108.

¹⁶For details on the little known December 1999 Memphis, Tennessee civil court ruling that implicated the government in the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., see Ruben Castaneda, "A Conspiracy of Silence," *American Journalism Review* 22,2 (March, 2000), 60ff. See also "Conspiracy in Memphis," *Economist* 353, 8150 (December 18, 1999), 27. The conclusion of a twenty-one month government investigation in June 2000 reported no governmental involvement.

homeland are treated as traitors.¹⁷ When CNN sent a reporter to an Iraqi mosque in Detroit, I was not at all surprised to see dozens of Iraqi Americans pledging support to Bush. With threats of deportation and images of physically and mentally abused prisoners of war in Guantanamo Bay,¹⁸ many felt they had no choice but bow to the image of American Imperialism; even if their relatives in Iraq were being blown apart by patriot missiles and cluster bombs.

The danger of refusing to bow has also been highlighted with the formation of the Department of Homeland Security. The development of this department has legalized the domestic espionage that had been taking place illegally for decades in this land of the free. Our nation has glorified the legacy of J. Edgar Hoover and revived the spirit of Senator Joseph R. McCarthy. None of us in this nation has any right to privacy.¹⁹ All the government has to do is suspect that you are associated with some subversive organization and it has the right to detain you indefinitely without the possibility of bail. When you are talking on the phone or sitting in your living room, your very conversation may be monitored by Big Brother. Tom Ridge and his lieutenants have ignited the embers in the fiery furnace, and with the establishment of the Patriot Act, the time is upon us when all who refuse to bow to the flag will be cast into the fiery furnace of retributive nationalistic justice.

The implications of refusing to bow to the stars and stripes extend beyond our borders. It seems as if America expects the entire world to demonstrate American patriotism and pledge allegiance to its flag. Professed allies of the United States have felt the scourge of an immature empire that has taken intolerance to a new level. After September 11, George Bush drew a line in the sand and declared that all who are not for US are against US. There is no room for a middle ground. No place for the former Switzerland in its days of neutrality. The effects of going against America are being felt now by Canada, France, and other nations whose economies are being threatened by childish companies and temperamental tourists, simply because they refused to support the unprovoked invasion and occupation of

¹⁷For details on “Operation Liberty Shield,” the initiative by the Department of Homeland Security to interview all Iraqi Americans, see Lorraine Ali and Vanessa Juarez, “We Love This Country,” *Newsweek* 141,14 (April 7, 2003), 50.

¹⁸Similar detention camps exist in Iraq, holding children as young as eleven. See Daniel McGrory, “In Baghdad, Families Live in Fear of Mid-night Call by U.S. Patrols,” *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs* 22,7 (September, 2003), 10f.

¹⁹See David Cole and James X. Dempsey, *Terrorism and the Constitution: Sacrificing Civil Liberties in the Name of National Security* (New York: New Press, 2002).

sanction weakened Iraq.²⁰

Only the brave will refuse to pledge allegiance under these circumstances. Only the brave will stand for a greater principle knowing that their choices may very well cost them their lives. Only the brave will dare to question the legitimacy of any nation that assumes divine status and aims to build a world fashioned after its ideologies. How can a Christian pledge allegiance to a nation that gives tax breaks to the same corporate executives with seven figure salaries who increased their own salaries last year while terminating the jobs of thousands of “low level” employees?²¹ How can a Christian pledge allegiance to a nation that claims to value democratic principles but provides its commander-in-chief with extraordinary military powers that he exercises like a malevolent dictator? How can a Christian pledge allegiance to a nation that criticizes other countries for restricting free speech while spewing its own deceitful propaganda through the so called news media that demonstrated their lack of ability to report the news during the latest fiasco in the Middle East? How can a Christian pledge allegiance to a nation that claims to value life, but applauds when a bunker buster hits an Iraqi housing complex and kills and maims innocent children as they sleep?

Sadly, many Christians have been mesmerized by those misguided television evangelists who have bought into the British-Israel school of prophetic interpretation and teach that America has been blessed by God. National blessings are measured in terms of economic prosperity, and many confuse the opulence in society with Divine favor. However, any person who takes an honest look at how America gained its economic status is forced to reevaluate this position. America was made great by the slaughter of the native Americans and the slavery of Africans. And even now, America remains great by the exploitation of Asians and others in developing nations who slave for pennies a day to afford us our luxuries. Yes, this is a prosperous and advanced nation, but it has been made thus at the

²⁰See “It’s not easy being French,” *Economist* 366, 8318 (April 5, 2003), 60.

²¹Matthew Benjamin, “Suite Deals,” *U.S. News & World Report* (April 29, 2002), 32-34, reports that between 1990 to 2000, the average worker received a pay increase of 37% while CEOs averaged 571%. See also Randall E. Stross, “Masters of the Universe,” *U.S. News & World Report* (May 27, 2002), 41, who mentions that the ratio between top managers pay and that of the average worker is 500:1. Among CEOs who earn excessive salaries are Douglas Daft or Coca Cola whose compensation doubled to almost \$106 million in 2001 while the company laid off thousands of low level workers and stock prices fell.

expense of the nations of the world.²²

Many have recognized the hypocrisy of a nation headed by a man who opposes affirmative action for Blacks, but was a beneficiary of affirmative action for the wealthy.²³ Those who see beyond the facade refuse to respond to the call to allegiance. When the music plays they lock their knees, straighten their backs, stick out their chests and stand firm. Like the three Hebrew soldiers, they know that pledging allegiance to a nation founded upon hypocrisy, is tantamount to pledging allegiance to the Prince of Darkness. These may sound like strong words, but they are biblical words. When Satan deceived Adam and Eve, he assumed ownership of the world. Paul in Ephesians 2:2 refers to him as the “prince of the power of the earth” and again in 2 Corinthians 4:4, he is called “the god of this world.” As Nebuchadnezzar’s dream made clear, while God is the one who permits the establishment and destruction of kingdoms, all earthly empires that seek world dominance are manifestations of the one kingdom that is headed by the Dragon—that ancient serpent, even Satan.

This movement was formed by God with the sole purpose of calling people out of the hypnotic grip of the evil Babylon and urging them to pledge allegiance to God, and God alone. Early Adventists did not fear calling governments and kings to accountability. While expressing appreciation for the opportunities afforded by the government to openly spread a divisive message, Adventists understood the second beast of Revelation 13 to represent the United States of America. However, as the church has climbed the social status and gained entrance at the ecumenical table, our prophetic position has been silenced. Not only do we now bow to the symbol of American supremacy, but the star and stripe laden image has a place of prominence at the front of many Adventist sanctuaries.

And in our schools, the first prayer our children utter for the day is not “Our Father which art in heaven,” but “I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, and the republic for which it stands.” After reciting this prayer with hand over heart every day for twelve years, it is no surprise that a small but significant percentage of Seventh-day Adventists joined the host of evangelical Christians who supported the recent act of aggression against a sovereign nation.

²²Capitalist status is often attained by contracting slave/cheap labor from illegal immigrants or other nations. For a discussion on the slavery component to capitalist systems see Anton Foek, “Sweat-shop Barbie,” *Humanist* 57,1 (January/February, 1997), 9ff. See also Justin Fox, “Where Your Job Is Going,” *Fortune* 148, 11 (November 24, 2003), 84-94.

²³See commentary by Ellis Henican, “When It Comes To Hypocrisy, He's Brilliant!” *Newsday* (January 17, 2003), A8.

It is no surprise that WOCG has volunteered its services to the religious right and the Republican biased USA Radio Network News. It is no surprise that no major Seventh-day Adventist publication—to my knowledge—has denounced the empire building ambitions of this crusading administration.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego knew that their fate was sealed but were determined to obey God rather than humans. When the enforcers informed Nebuchadnezzar of the defiance displayed by the Hebrew men, Nebuchadnezzar was somewhat saddened. These were solid members of his government who had served valiantly and faithfully. They accomplished their tasks with accuracy and professionalism and had raised the standard of efficiency in their respective departments. Surely these loyal workers who have made fine contributions to the empire would not openly defy the President of the United States of Babylon. When the case was brought to the king, he loosely interpreted his own law and sought to give them a second chance to prove their patriotism.²⁴ After all, this was not worship in the true sense. They were not being cajoled to bow to a real god. They were just being asked to acknowledge the accomplishments of the only remaining super power. What could be wrong with this? What could be wrong with pledging allegiance to a nation through a physical emblem?

Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah listened to the king and then offered their respectful response. “O King, if the only option we have is to be thrown into the fiery furnace, then so be it. But we will not serve your gods, nor will we pledge allegiance to your golden statue. Please don’t think we are being rude, but we serve a God who is able to deliver us from the fiery furnace, and from your hand. And even if he chooses not to, we will not bow down to your image.” Publically embarrassed by their response and infuriated by their pious obstinance, Nebuchadnezzar ordered the furnace to be made seven times hotter and passed judgement on the brave soldiers of God. Those who know the story, will recall that God miraculously delivered the young men and the king was impressed to the point of conversion.

Everybody’s story may not end like the three Hebrews. Some who choose not to pledge allegiance to the image may have to endure the horrors of the furnace

²⁴The possibility that Nubuchadnezzar was giving the men a second chance is also suggested by Norman W. Porteous, *Daniel* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1965), 59.

without any benefit of divine anaesthesia.²⁵ Even while I speak today, there are Christians in many nations around the globe who are being persecuted for righteousness sake. Many are being persecuted because they choose to obey God rather than humans and engage in civil disobedience against oppressive and repressive governments. Some will undergo swift executions, while others will be forced to endure slow tortuous deaths. And there will be some who God miraculously delivers. However, those who serve God should not be beguiled by the Lois Lane expectations of Superman rescuing her from danger in the nick of time. That which encouraged the Hebrews was not the assurance that God *would* deliver, but the knowledge that he *could*. Consequently, they were not going to sell their souls for status and societal recognition. I'm sure they feared Nebuchadnezzar, but they understood the sentiment of Jesus' words when he said, "Don't fear the one who can only harm your body, but fear Him who can destroy both body and soul in Gehenna." Like Joseph, they had determined that they would rather spend eternity in the courts of God than "to enjoy the pleasure of sin for a season."

My brothers and sisters, as prophecy unveils itself before our very eyes, God is looking for men and women who are determined to pledge allegiance to the One who made the stars, and the One by whose stripes we are healed. He is looking for those who will not be conformed by the world but will be transformed by the renewal of the mind (Rom 12:1-2). He is looking for men and women who will be in the world, but not of the world. Paul calls them citizens belonging to the spiritual commonwealth of Israel (Gal 6:16; Eph 2:12-13). Hebrews dubs them "strangers and foreigners...who desire a better country" (11:13-16). Peter refers to them as "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation" (1 Peter 2:9). John highlights them as those who "don't love the world or the things of the world... for the world and its desire are passing away, but those who do the will of God live forever" (1 John 2:17).

Yes, some of us will be thrown into the fiery furnace. We will be thrown into the fiery furnace of rejection by friends, family, and even pastors. We will be thrown into the fiery furnace of prison cells and torture chambers. Some of us who were not born in this great nation will be thrown into the fiery furnace of deportation. Some may be thrown into the furnace of trumped up charges and

²⁵Wengst, 72-76, comments on Paul's discussion on the political repercussions experienced by those Christians who chose God's kingdom over Rome. Robert N. Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," *Daedalus* 96,1 (1967), 14, reminds us of the dangers of American civil religion: "The civil religion has not always been invoked in favor of worthy causes. On the domestic scene, an American-Legion type of ideology that fuses God, country, and flag has been used to attack non-conformist and liberal ideas and groups of all kinds."

malicious lies. But even as we face the fire, I pray that we will be able to testify to our accusers that we will never bow to the idol of nationalistic compromise. We serve a God who is *able* to deliver us from the fiery furnace, and we pledge allegiance to His kingdom and His kingdom alone.

And even if chooses not to deliver us from the fiery furnace and we are forced to face death, like Job we understand that “although worms may eat our mortal bodies, yet in our flesh we shall see God” (Job 19:26). For when time is no more and every earthly empire has been permanently eradicated, “the LORD himself shall descend with a shout and the voice of an archangel, and the dead in Christ shall rise. And those who are alive and remain shall be caught up with them in the clouds to meet the LORD in the air, and so shall we ever be with the LORD” (1 Thess 4:16-17). Maranatha! Even so come Lord Jesus.

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