

DUELING ALLEGIANCES

Christ and Country: The Pledge of Allegiance

By Jerry Truex; April 18, 2010

A. Introduction

Today we begin a series entitled, "Dueling Pledges." In this series, we will focus on our loyalties and our priorities, especially how our loyalties and priorities compete with our loyalty God.

In this series, we will have a brief teaching, reader's theater, and discussion.

Today we focus on "dueling pledges." I will introduce it with five thoughts or words, before we move to the reader's theater.

B. The Pledge of Allegiance¹

First, a word about our Pledge of Allegiance.

Our current Pledge of Allegiance is this:

"I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America and to the republic for which it stands, one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all."

It was originally written in 1892 by Francis Bellamy (1855-1931).

- In 1923, the words, "the Flag of the United States of America," were added.
- In 1954, in response to the Communist threat, Congress to add the words "under God".

Among the nations of the world, only the U.S. and the Philippines have pledges to their flags, although other countries require oaths to the king/queen/country by immigrants.

C. Human governments

Second, a word about governments.

The Pledge of Allegiance can be understood as a pledge to certain ideals, but for practical purposes it boils down to a pledge to the U.S. government, its policies, and its leaders.

¹ Historic Documents at <http://www.ushistory.org/documents/pledge.htm>.

1. On the one hand, in so far as governments promote justice and the common good, Christians are to respect rulers, pay taxes, and obey laws. The NT is explicit about our obligations to human governments.²

2. On the other hand, governments tend to demand total allegiance. In this way, they compete with God and become idolatrous. When this happens, we are to “obey God rather than any human authority” (Acts 5:29).

D. The Pledge is the *Shema* of civil religion

Third, a word about civil religion.

Patriotism tends to see loyalty to the country as the same thing as loyalty to God. This is civil religion. Duty to country (whatever that might be) counts as duty to God.

The Pledge tends to support this type of civil religion. The Pledge becomes a sacred ritual. In a way, it is the *Shema* of civil religion. Look at the quasi-religious functions of the Pledge.

1. The Pledge claims that the U.S. is “under God,” which implies the U.S. has divine authority and divine mandate.
2. The Pledge involves an act of devotion. People stand at attention, place their hands over hearts,³ and recite sacred words.
3. The Pledge is prayer-like indoctrination. School children, over a twelve year span, say it thousands of times in a drowsy, semi-hypnotic state at 8 o’clock in the morning.
4. The Pledge is symbolic ritual. It penetrates the soul. In the soul, it competes with God, who comes to us in other rituals such as the Lord’s Prayer and Communion.

E. *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (1995)

Fourth, a word about the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*.

Article 23 concerns our relationship to human governments.

Article 23: “The only Christian nation is the church of Jesus Christ, made up of people from every tribe and nation, called to witness to God’s glory.” (1 Pet. 2:9)

² Matt 22:15-22; Rom 13:1-7; 1 Tim 2:1-4; “Seek the welfare of the city” (Jer. 29:7).

³ Before 1942, people used the Bellamy salute or Roman salute (a gesture in which the right arm is held out forward straight, with palm down, and fingers touching), but because it resembled the Nazis salute, it was changed to the hand over the heart by President Roosevelt.

In other words, Mennonites see the church as God's nation—which has no geographical or ethnic boundaries. Christians are citizens of God's kingdom and not any other.

F. The Flag

Fifth, think of the U.S. Flag.

On the one hand, the flag symbolizes high ideals. It symbolizes freedom of conscience, representational government, racial and gender equality, human dignity and human rights—these are ideals we can affirm.

On the other hand, the flag symbolizes things that are not so good; it symbolizes harmful U.S. policies. To people around the world:

- The US flag symbolize militarism; that our government uses of war to extend our economic and political power at the expense of other people.
- The US flag symbolizes an overuse of global resources; that our country uses twice as much energy per person as citizens of other industrialized nations.
- The US flag symbolizes nationalism; that we think we are better than other people.

Is there an alternative to pledging allegiance to the flag? For that possibility, we now turn to a reader's theater.

G. Reader's Theater: Dueling Pledges

[Reader's theater – 10 min concluded with the alternative pledge]⁴

I pledge allegiance ...

I pledge allegiance to Jesus Christ

... to just the country of my birth

and to God's kingdom for which he died:

... to my freedom, comfort, privacy

one Spirit-led people the world over;

... in other words, to mostly me !

indivisible, with love and justice for all.

⁴ The Alternative Pledge was written by J. Nelson Kraybill and June Alliman Yoder, professors at AMBS.

H. Discussion

1. Which character's view of the Pledge of Allegiance do you identify with more, Ray or Jan? Why? Is pledging allegiance to Christ and country an either/or thing?
2. Can one be grateful to one's country without pledging allegiance to it?
3. What does it mean to be patriotic?
4. If we believe God created the whole world, should our loyalty be to one nation or to all nations?
5. Consider writing your own Pledge of Allegiance. Beside Christ, what do you think is worth pledging alliance to in your life?