

“Upon the Lampstand”

“After lighting a lamp there is not one person who conceals it with something or who puts it underneath a bed. Instead the person puts it upon a Lampstand so that those who come inside may see the light.”—*Jesus of Nazareth*, as recorded in the Gospel of Luke 8:16–17.

Question: *Does the Bible prohibit Christians from saluting national flags or saying pledges of allegiance that do not constitute acts of worship? (May 22, 2007)*

Answer: I will here only answer the question with respect to whether there is anything in the Bible that would prohibit a Christian worshipper of Jehovah God from saluting the flag of the United States of America by standing and saying the “pledge of allegiance,” as that is the only pledge with which I am familiar and the question can only be answered with respect to the actual wording and action involved in saluting a particular nation’s flag.

The United State’s pledge of allegiance, which is said during the act of standing and saluting the flag, is as follows:

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.

I do not know anyone who says this pledge and who at the same time believes that he or she is saying anything other than that they will be loyal to the government and laws of the United States so long as those laws do not conflict with God’s laws (= “one nation under God”). Of course, if anyone would mean by saying the above pledge some act of worship or that their country comes before God, then that would change things completely as far as what a Christian worshipper of Jehovah would do, based on the reasons for belief given in the Bible, which a Christian accepts also for good reasons, as an authoritative guide for belief, conduct, and worship.

For example, in the New Testament we read of a conflict between the orders given by rulers of the Jewish “nation” (compare John 11:48) and the activities of Christian members of this same nation:

Acts 5:27–32 (NWT)

So they brought them and stood them in the Sanhedrin hall. And the high priest questioned them and said: “We positively ordered YOU not to keep teaching upon the basis of this name, and yet, look! YOU have filled Jerusalem with YOUR teaching, and YOU are determined to bring the blood of this man upon us.” In answer Peter and the [other]

apostles said: “We must obey God as ruler rather than men. The God of our forefathers raised up Jesus, whom YOU slew, hanging him upon a stake. God exalted this one as Chief Agent and Savior to his right hand, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses of these matters, and so is the holy spirit, which God has given to those obeying him as ruler. [Underline added.]

Where the laws of such nations did not conflict with what God required, then it was proper for Christians in the first century to give “God’s public servants” who called for “the tribute, the tribute; to him who [calls for] fear, such fear; to him who [calls for] honor, such honor” (Romans 13:7–8). Giving “tribute” to or ‘honoring’ political rulers or the symbols of the nation they govern does not appear inappropriate, so long as it is clearly understood that those Christians who give such “tribute” and “honor” would never do so and then be expected to ‘disobey God as ruler and obey man.’ Again, that is not what pledging allegiance to the flag of the United States of America means.

Of course, there are disagreements about what it is that God allows. For example, some who claim to be Christian and who are also citizens of the United States may believe that their allegiance to their country includes serving God or Christ in nationally sponsored wars. There is no basis in the New Testament for this belief, and what is there taught clearly conflicts with the consequences of war (Matthew 5:38–39; 26:52; Romans 10:14–15; 12:17–21). Of course, Christians do not take sides in any earthly war, for we can never be certain when God may be using a nation “to express wrath upon the one practicing what is bad” (Romans 13:4). We simply obey the laws of our country, even pledging our allegiance to do so, but always with the understanding that we “obey God as ruler rather than men.”

Christian worshippers of Jehovah may still decide not to give such pledges, tribute, or honor by saluting the flag or by saying the United States pledge of allegiance, but they have no basis for imposing their conscience on others apart from a clearly stated biblical teaching. In fact, one could argue that saluting the flag and saying the pledge of allegiance, as stated above, and, again, with the understanding that the person saying the pledge would always “obey God as ruler rather than men,” is following the principle laid down by “Peter and the [other] apostles.” So it is a matter for each Christian to decide, as the issue is not clearly addressed in the Bible, or at least there is no clear basis to claim that it is wrong to make such an obviously qualified pledge.

Many Christians, however, adopt the opinion expressed frequently in literature published by the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society regarding the flag salute or saying the pledge of allegiance, namely:

***The Watchtower*, September 15, 2002, pages 23–24, 25:**

Because of their understanding of the Bible, many make a personal decision to refrain from participating in the flag salute and in the singing of patriotic songs.

But how do they conduct themselves when confronted with situations that bring them face-to-face with these issues?

Refrain Respectfully

In an effort to strengthen the unity of his empire, King Nebuchadnezzar of ancient Babylon set up a huge golden image on the plain of Dura. He then arranged for an inauguration ceremony to which he invited his satraps, prefects, governors, counselors, and other high officials. At the sound of music, all gathered were to bow down and worship the image. Among those who had to be present were three young Hebrews—Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. How did they show that they were not participating in this religious ceremony? As the music began and those gathered prostrated themselves before the image, the three Hebrews remained standing.—Daniel 3:1–12.

Today, flags are usually saluted with outstretched arm or with the hand held to the forehead or over the heart. At times, some special bodily position may be assumed. In some lands, children at school are expected to kneel and kiss the flag. By standing quietly while others salute the flag, true Christians make it evident that they are respectful observers.

...

Thus, Christians endeavor to be peaceable, respectful, and gentle as they rely on their Bible-trained conscience in making personal decisions regarding flag salute and the singing of a national anthem. [Underling added.]

The above strongly suggests that “true Christians make it evident that they are respectful observers.” I say “suggests” even though this is what is actually said in the above quotes, because the same article says that “many” make such a decision, not “all.” Also, the matter is said to be a “personal decision,” not a biblically mandated one, unless of course the issue is one of worshipping the flag as we read in the account of Daniel 3:1–12, also referenced in the article. But that is not what any Christian who chooses to salute the flag or to say the pledge of allegiance as a “tribute” or “honor” to the country in which he or she lives is doing.

Thus, based on the evidence from the Bible, if a Christian worshipper of Jehovah is asked or attempts to perform an act of worship (such as “bowing down”) before the flag of the United States or of any other flag or image, or if a Christian says the pledge of allegiance with any other meaning than that he or she will be loyal to the laws of this country but will at the same time always “obey God as ruler rather than man,” it would be scripturally wrong. If, however, a Christian merely means to pay tribute or honor to political rulers or the symbols of the nations they govern, without ever performing an act of worship before them or their symbols, then such pledges, tributes, and honor are not scripturally forbidden. Indeed, they are encouraged because they are “God’s minister to you for your good,” and from whom “you will have praise” if you “keep doing good” (Romans 13:3–4) by being “in fear of God [and] have honor for the king” (1 Peter 2:17).

Don't get me wrong: I am not advocating the saluting of the flag or the saying of the pledging of allegiance, but I see no biblical basis for condemning those who do as a part of the “tribute” and “honor” they decide they can pay to the political entities and symbols of this world, without compromising their exclusive devotion and worship of the “only true God,” the Father, Jehovah (Luke 4:7-8; John 8:54; 17:3).

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