

120 Mouw, Richard. *How to Be a Patriotic Christian: Love of Country as Love of Neighbor*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2022. pp. 160. \$17 (paperback). ISBN: 978-1-5140-0402-9.

American theologian Richard Mouw has written on a variety of topics over the course of his illustrious career. His latest work, *How to Be a Patriotic Christian: Love of Country as Love of Neighbor*, offers insight on the current political climate in the United States and how best to wade through the tension-filled atmosphere surrounding patriotic expression. As he notes, his efforts in this work address basic questions to help the reader assess “what it means to love one’s country in a manner that is appropriate for followers of Jesus” (9). Though modest in his approach, Mouw pushes past a latitudinarian indifferentism without coming off as dogmatic.

In the title, “Christian” is the noun; “patriotic” is the adjective. Mouw intentionally draws this distinction to make clear what undergirds his subsequent analysis. Christians are first and foremost disciples of Jesus Christ who owe their ultimate allegiance to His Kingdom (which is not of this world). Mouw aptly acknowledges that there are many across the globe who are “in Christ,” so there is a diversity of nationalities represented amongst the body of believers (4). How, then, should the Christian faith recast political involvement and patriotic expression for themselves in the country where they reside? This is the question Mouw seeks to address.

At the outset, Mouw identifies the impetus for his writing. There is, he contends, a problem in Christian circles when it comes to engaging the American political arena. He locates it clearly when he says,

The problem these days, of course, is that the public debates about patriotism are often dominated by the extremes. This has been especially true in recent years when polarization seems to have become the rule of the day. The result is that many folks—especially many thoughtful Christians that I know—avoid talking about these things (2).

Mouw ventures to try the very thing he finds Christians reluctant to do: talk about politics. His assessment is succinct. Rather than propounding upon political theory at length, Mouw’s thoughts in this brief book lend themselves to the casual and curious reader. He acknowledges

there may be people who read the book and do not reside in the United States, but he analyzes his own patriotism in the US, and from his own context attempts to draw more general conclusions regarding how Christians anywhere can best live a patriotic life.

In the first chapter, “Wrestling Together,” Mouw gestures towards Jacob’s famous wrestling match with an angel in Genesis 32. His reference to this passage is clear because his proposed method of patriotic engagement is “wrestling.” Mouw employs the physical combat in the text as a metaphor for a methodology for patriotic involvement. Mouw notes that Jacob “engaged in the match in order to be blessed” (3). Likewise, our struggle and great efforts to engage in critical conversations and debates about the health of the nation are what will bless our patriotic endeavors.

In the second chapter, “We the People,” Mouw says that “being patriotic is much more about having an affection for the nation rather than the state” (29). He explains the distinction between the two: “A state is a governmental system that has authority over a territory with definable boundaries” (28–9), while “a nation is a community of people who experience some kind of unity, based on shared memories of our collective past and some cultural practices and loyalties that we have in common” (29). This distinction between state and nation is important, but I am reluctant to concede that cultivating affections for one’s nation is requisite for loving one’s nation in a manner that befits a Christian. Mouw sets up his argument to parallel one’s love for their neighbor, however, when Jesus says to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:39), there is no clear imperative to kindle feelings of affection for one’s neighbor. Doing so could help orient the individual to love their neighbor, but it is hardly clear that it is necessary. Even if granting the dubious premise that affection for one’s neighbor is a sufficient condition for loving them, it does not follow that such affections are a necessary condition for loving one’s neighbor and, *mutatis mutandis*, neither is affection for one’s nation a prerequisite for loving it well. Perhaps Mouw will have to pen an Edwards-esque “*Patriotic Affections*” before I follow him on this point.

Later, in a chapter titled “Hopes and Fears,” Mouw states what I find to be one of the most salient thoughts of the whole book. He writes,

If having a loving relationship with my kinfolk can only be sustained by my being proud of them, or by my needing the stimu-

lus of family celebrations, then my sense of belonging does not go deep. To be sure, being proud of the accomplishments of people we love and enjoying family gatherings are good things. But being a healthy family member also means hanging in there with the loved ones even when they bring me grief (137).

To further Mouw's analysis on this point, I would point out that the growth of technological platforms has robbed communication of its healthy soil—relationship. Many people cannot honestly call their neighbors "loved ones." He could have done more to address this issue and its effect on the US political climate, but as he rightly points out, love must endure through hardships for it to be love, and that sometimes means bearing the weight of deep disappointment with a nation's leaders and fellow citizens.

In sum, Mouw offers refreshing insight amidst a contentious political climate in the United States. He rightly notes that prayer is essential to our love of country (78); he exhorts Christians to take issue with simply trying to fit into the two-party system (91); and he encourages Christians to submit to authorities while remaining in solidarity with those who have fallen victim to injustices at the hands of the state (79). *How to Be a Patriotic Christian* can encourage Christians to talk about politics in a way that inspires a mutual attempt to understand each other's hopes and fears while entering into a commitment where love of country is love of neighbor.

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