

Abraham Lincoln was once asked if he thought God was on the side of the Union during the Civil War. He replied that he couldn't say whether God was on their side, but he knew that we must always strive to be on God's side, for God is always in the right. That impressed me when I heard it and reflects my feelings about patriotic hymns. I am uncomfortable with songs that insist God is on our side, but I love those that humbly admit we may not have it all right and ask God to help us be better.

I think my favorite patriotic hymn is "America the Beautiful," written by Katharine Lee Bates. She was on a trip to Pike's Peak and was overwhelmed by the country's natural beauty. She felt blessed to live in such a wonderful place, and her poem talks about striving to be worthy of that gift. Her poem takes the form of a prayer, asking God not to overlook our flaws, but to mend them. It suggests that a healthy love of homeland also loves mercy more than life. It implicitly recognizes that, like any nation, America is flawed, and it doesn't ask God to ignore or gloss over those problems, but to give us the strength to recognize and correct them.

That's always an appropriate theme in worship. As individuals, we confess our sins and pray that, with God's help, we can be better. We should also confess and ask for guidance as a nation. As the song says...

*America! America!
May God thy gold refine,
Till all success be nobleness,
And every gain divine!*