

Should Flags Be Allowed in God's Sanctuary?

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Occasionally pastors receive recommendations of the military recognition team in their church congregation to place the United States flag in the chancel of the church sanctuary. Such recommendations raise this important question pertaining to the appropriateness of the request. How should it be answered?

At the outset, I should say that I understand and appreciate the passion of the veterans in our church and elsewhere; they have given much in the service of their and our country. Members of my family have served in the military to defend our country, one very dear who lost his life in battle. Nevertheless, the Bible teaches self-control, including of our passions.

Moreover, the Bible is our ultimate authority. Though it does not address specifically the issue of flags in a church sanctuary, we have been blessed with some outstanding literature in Biblical worship which does offer insight, wisdom, and guidance within a historic Christian theological framework that does address this issue. One, which is a highly valued classic in the field of church worship and architecture, is *Christ and Architecture* by Donald J. Bruggink and Carl H. Droppers. Donald Bruggink is professor emeritus of historical theology at Western Theological Seminary; he still conducts international tours and lectures on church architecture. At the time the book was written, Carl Droppers was a professor at Western Reserve University in the department of architecture and a very active elder and teacher in his church. In addition to my own thoughts, I've excerpted below several of Bruggink's and Droppers' key points.

As I explain in my instruction manual on Christian worship, we see corporate worship in the Bible occurring as a dialogue between God and his people. God calls us into his presence to worship and engages us in a series of interactions including the opportunity to say and sing our praise of him, confess our sins and receive assurance of his forgiveness, hear his Word on other subjects as well, respond in a heartfelt commitment to obey his Word, bring to him our prayers, give him our tithes and offerings, and receive his sending us out for service the coming week with a benediction that he will be with and help us in all we need in all ways always. Anything that distracts from the dialogue between God and his people in worship is counterproductive and should be avoided.

The key aspect of our Christian worship is God's main message of grace in the redemption for his people in the life, suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, who is the way, the truth, and the life, the only way we can enter the presence of God the Father. (John 14:6) The historic architectural symbols of the three means of grace in Christ (the pulpit for the preaching of the Word, the baptismal font, and the table for the Lord's Supper) are placed in the chancel to facilitate the visual focus of the worshipers on Christ Jesus: what he did and what we need to do in response to his grace. Bruggink and Droppers thus rightly and strongly urge churches to have only those architectural symbols in the chancel, as many throughout the world do.

Parsimoniously condensing a rich and complex global church history and practice, it is still possible to see the threefold structure of the Christian sanctuary throughout history that corresponds to the threefold structure of the tabernacle and the temple in Bible times (the holy of

holies, the inner court, and the outer court corresponding respectively to the church's chancel, the nave, and the narthex). As God spoke from the holy of holies in the tabernacle and the temple, so throughout church history the architecture of the chancel area is where his people have observed the Word of God proclaimed, coming to us in word and sacrament.

Neither any national flag nor the relatively recent Christian flag are means of God's grace to his people. Further, a national flag in the chancel is confusing, and sometimes a stumbling block, to citizens of other countries who come to worship as part of God's plan to include those from "every nation, tribe, people and language." (Revelation 5:9; 7:9) We certainly don't want to do anything that would contradict our confession of being part of the holy catholic church, the original wording in the creeds as we profess to believe in our worship services.

Where, then, should the flag be placed? If a flag needs to be in the sanctuary at all, Bruggink and Droppers offer this counsel:

...But what of these flags? The pulpit, the font, the table, all point to Christ, but what of these flags? The flags speak not of Christ but of the nation. Are they to tell us that this church is subject to the nation? Are they to tell us that the Word of God may be proclaimed in this church only as long as it does not conflict with the will of the nation?...Or do they mean that the nation is also a means of God's grace? No, certainly these flags must not proclaim such messages! But then what are they doing there along with the God-given means of grace? Is not the national flag in this position really heresy?

...The Church of Christ best serves this great nation not in being an obsequious servant of its policies...but rather by playing its God-given role of prophet to the nation, speaking as best it can in obedience to Christ.

...if the role of the Church as prophet is taken seriously, perhaps there is a place in the church for a flag. But to put it with the means of grace, Word and Sacraments, is to invite confusion [and distraction]. To place it near the [liturgical] west wall of the church [i.e., in the opposite end of the sanctuary from the chancel], where it too receives the preaching of the Word, is to give it a proper place. For, really, is not this exactly what Christians believe? The Christian loves his [or her] country, not only for its bounty, but also for the freedom it has given him [and her] to worship God. Love of country, yes, that should be true for all of us...Not only are we alarmed by the seeming breakdown of those religious principles, but it is our desire as well that the Christian message of redemption in Christ be proclaimed to the entire nation....

Now all of the above is precisely what is expressed when the national flag is put at the [liturgical] west end of the church. This signifies that we believe that it is the hearing of the Word of God that has made America strong in the past, and that our country must continue to hear the Word of God if it is to remain great. Perhaps the flag should not be in the midst of the congregation, for the nation, per se, is not a member of the body of Christ. But it can quite properly be placed at

the rear of the nave, either in the middle, or to the side, as the arrangement of the church may dictate. Another, and perhaps preferable solution, would be to have the flag mounted in a bracket, extending from the balcony.

The true Christian patriot is one who wishes to keep this country free and strong, under God. This cannot be done by attaching the church as a caboose to the train of national policy. The true Christian patriot is the one who through the Church helps guide his nation in paths of righteousness. The true patriot is interested in freeing the Church to be true to Christ its King, and in that obedience ministering to the nation. Those who are reformed according to the Word of God, must accept the words of Peter when he told the leaders of his nation, “We must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29). If the two are ever in conflict, then God must come before nation.

...let us render to both God and Caesar their due...The symbol of the nation does not belong with God’s means of grace, the Word and the Sacraments. They alone belong at the front of our churches, for it is God alone who deserves to be worshiped. Instead, the symbol of the nation must be in such a position that it is visually clear to all that the nation must also hear the Word, that it too needs the prophetic and redemptive message of God. (450-453)

As important as patriotism is, it should never trump Biblical theology. For more on patriotism see pages 451-453 of *Christ and Architecture*.

The main point being made by Bruggink and Droppers is that the nation is a recipient rather than a means of God’s grace. The message in the sanctuary must not be a mixed message confusing to God’s people and others who attend. The visual symbols should neither contradict nor distract from the Word of God proclaimed from the pulpit.

The basic principle we should lift up before all groups, and individuals, who have ideas as to what the church should do, especially and most of all in regard to the worship of God who is holy, holy, holy (Isaiah 6:3; Revelation 4:8) as well as love to the core of his being (1 John 4:8), can be expressed most effectively as a question: Does this proposal fit with what God requires in his worship, as is written in his Word and in historic Christian theology? You may wish to fine-tune the wording of the question, but such questions profoundly affect the cognitive and affective mental processes and establish the Biblical framework for the discussion, which is likely one of the reasons Jesus used questions so much in his teaching.

I suggest that when answering questions about flags in the church sanctuary, we assume honest, albeit misinformed, motives on the part of those who want to place flags in the chancel or anywhere else in the main part of the sanctuary. With God in control of everything, I trust that with prayer and a pastoral heart the matter can be resolved by affirming veterans’ sacrificial service to our country, from which the church also benefits, and then by explaining the above in love. With that explanation, and inviting them to prayerfully join us in a Biblical decision-making effort to discern a place acceptable to God for the flag to be, we should arrive at a

decision acceptable to all. This matter seems to be an opportunity to help people learn some significant Biblical and theological aspects of worship.