

1-1-2005

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Recommended Citation

Pulleyking, Micki (2005) "Flying the Flag in Church: A Tale of Strife and Idolatry," *Leaven*: Vol. 13: Iss. 4, Article 3.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol13/iss4/3>

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Flying the Flag in Church: A Tale of Strife and Idolatry

MICKI PULLEYKING

As a girl growing up in the Church of Christ, I aspired to marry a minister, just as my maternal grandmother had done. This aspiration sufficed to fill my desire to serve the church, until I grew fascinated with the study of religion and decided to pursue a Master of Divinity degree at Harvard. Thinking I would never be able to use such a degree to actually pastor a church in the Churches of Christ, I sought the degree solely for the sake of learning. I learned. While studying at Harvard, I felt compelled to seek ordination. It was an excruciating decision, because it meant leaving the Church of Christ, a place called home and family.

My first church was a large Disciples of Christ congregation where I served as the Associate Minister. Again, I learned. Significant friendships were birthed and flourish to this day. As an Associate Minister I worked primarily with Sunday school classes, led youth activities, purchased curriculum and attended meetings. I spent a lot more time on the telephone than in the pulpit. These tasks are important in congregational life, but they were not a good fit for my hopes and gifts. So I went back to Boston to seek a Ph.D. in religion.

Having finished my coursework, I returned home to Springfield, Missouri, in 1991 to begin teaching in the Department of Religious Studies at Southwest Missouri State University. Because I love preaching, I decided to preach occasionally for churches that needed someone to fill in, with no plans or desire to work for a church. In the fall of 1991 I received a call asking if I could preach one Sunday for the Billings Christian Church, a small congregation just outside Springfield. I agreed. They needed me to come a second Sunday. I agreed. They were looking for a pastor - specifically, they were looking for "a young man with a family." I didn't fit the bill, and I didn't want a church! They called again. I returned another Sunday and another...

I have been the Pastor of the Billings Christian Church for almost fifteen years now. The church has grown. I have grown. They are family. I love these folks! We do not agree on a variety of theological and political issues. We have wrestled with real social concerns regarding race, money, sexual orientation, the death penalty, and war. We have not avoided theological issues related to interpretations of scripture, theodicy, and world religions. We have diversity of opinion! In spite of our differences, we are able to exchange strong handshakes and heartfelt hugs, and articulate expressions of affection for one another. Over the past fifteen years we have waited together in hospitals and stood beside one another at many gravesites.

In all this diversity, only one issue has been powerful enough nearly to divide us: the American flag.

I had been the Pastor of the Billings Christian Church for about eight months when I learned it was our turn to host the community Vacation Bible School. I noticed the morning schedule read, "Pledge." Yes, indeed, VBS was to begin each morning with a prayer and the Pledge of Allegiance. That was the way it had always been done. This struck me as odd. Why would you ever say the Pledge of Allegiance in a sanctuary where the church gathers weekly to proclaim their loyalty to God alone? The mere presence of the flags seemed to me an unholy presence. But I recognized that many Disciples congregations had flags in the front

of the sanctuaries. I was the new kid (youngest preacher too) in town. I was grateful for the opportunity to pastor. This was a congregation that had never allowed women to be elders, and yet they called me to preach for them each Sunday. I didn't want to cause any trouble, but I could not be silent.

I made a lengthy presentation at the next board meeting, delineating all of the reasons it was not theologically acceptable to say the Pledge in the sanctuary. I noted that the presence of national symbols was problematic. They kindly listened. OK, no Pledge at VBS, they agreed. One astute elder even told me that he appreciated my insights related to the idolatry of patriotism. (A few years later he would not recall such an expression of appreciation.)

I felt emboldened. At Advent I actually had the audacity to remove the flags from the chancel and place them at the back of the church next to the copy room and nursery. No one said anything. As soon as Christmas was over, however, someone returned the flags to their former place of prominence just behind the pulpit, the American flag to the left of the cross and the Christian flag to the right.

During the Lenten season, I took the flags to the back. Again, after Easter, they returned to the front. This dance continued from 1992 until Christmas 1997, when I quietly removed the flags for Advent for the last time. They never returned. Years passed. New members joined the church. A church directory was made containing many sanctuary photos without flags. No one noticed.

In the winter of 2001, someone asked, "What happened to the flags?" Nothing. They had been gone for four years. I thought it had become a non-issue. I was wrong. It seemed that a few congregants began talking a great deal behind the scenes advocating a return of the flags. I suggested that before we hastily return them to their former position of guarding the cross, we should form a committee and study the place of national symbols in the church. Furor erupted. I had never seen such intense emotion in this congregation, and felt the anger of others directed toward me.

The church board reluctantly allowed the study to proceed. Three remarkable members agreed to research the history and theological implications of flags in churches. At the outset two of these members candidly said they saw no problem with flags in churches. Seeing no hope for understanding, and feeling completely alone, I wanted to resign.

Some churches purchased flags after Flag Day in 1954, when President Eisenhower signed into law the Act of Congress adding "under God" to the Pledge of Allegiance.

Each person on the study committee did his or her own research. As we met each of us brought articles we had found and ideas we had considered: We discovered that American flags were brought into U.S. sanctuaries during WWII to remember the soldiers fighting in war. Flags are often used to stir the fighting spirit of soldiers, or as a symbol of victory in war. Is the holy sanctuary the place to stir the fighting spirit or declare victory over any earthly enemy? In the 1950's, during the Cold War, America's patriotism swelled. Some churches purchased flags after Flag Day in 1954, when President Eisenhower signed into law the Act of Congress adding "under God" to the Pledge of Allegiance. A flag represents a specific place in a specific time. Obviously there were no American flags in the early church. Can one even fathom first or second century Christians allowing Roman flags to function as religious symbols? I think not. Somehow Christianity managed to spread all over the world without national flags rising above its communion tables. Nationalism, disguised as religion, thrived during the Crusades, and in other times and places. Churches in Nazi Germany proudly displayed their nation's flag.

It is estimated that a quarter of a million churches display the Christian flag. What is it? The Christian flag has no biblical or ecclesiastical tradition. Instead, in 1897 at a chapel in Coney Island, the featured speaker failed to show up. Needing to fill the vacant time, Charles Overton delivered an impromptu speech in which he produced a verbal picture of a "Christian flag." Subsequently, as churches began to place

American flags in the sanctuary, a second flag was needed for decorative balance. Hence more Christian flags were sold, for which the Overton family still receives royalties.

The U.S. Flag Code requires that the American flag be hung in the place of highest honor when displayed. In churches where flags are placed on the platform with the pulpit, the American flag must have the place of honor to the minister's right. For churches that hang their flags on a pole outside, the American flag must be placed on top of a Christian flag, representing the higher authority. What does such symbolism mean?

Our study led us to three important conclusions: First, whenever a national symbol is displayed in the church it is an unspoken form of idolatry. Second, Christians are to remember that their true citizenship is not tied to any country but to the kingdom of God. Third, the God Christians claim to worship is the God of all persons, the creator God who equally loves all creation.

IDOLATRY: ONE NATION OVER GOD

"You shall have no other gods before me." Exod 20:3

"Again the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor, and he said to him, 'All these things I will give to you...' Jesus said to him Satan! For it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only God.'" Matt 3:8-10.

The United States is a kingdom of this world with great splendor, power, and wealth. I cannot imagine Jesus succumbing to the temptation to place loyalty to this country, no matter how great it is perceived to be, above, equal to, or anywhere near his loyalty to God.

President Eisenhower added the words "under God" to the Pledge of Allegiance. But do U.S. Christians really believe the nation is to be placed below, beneath, and under God? Do U.S. Christians understand that *all nations* are under God? More commonly I hear the words "God and country" used together as if the two comfortably function side by side, referring to our special God and our special country.

The Flag Code, mentioned earlier, requires that the U.S. flag be given the place of prominence whenever it is displayed. Thus in churches where flags are used, the national flag is given the higher position over the Christian flag. In fact, the flag frequently rises higher in the front of the sanctuary than does the cross! While the Pledge asserts that the nation is "under God," I suspect that the policy made concrete in the Flag Code exhibits our true commitments.¹ But Christian symbols should never be subordinated to any secular symbols in the church sanctuary.

Do we need flags to help us worship God? In our congregation, I share a children's sermon each week. I have often thought you could ask the children to look around the sanctuary and tell me things they see that point to God, things one would see in churches all over the world. I suspect they would point to the baptismal water, the communion table, the Bible, and cross. These are clearly religious symbols that Christians around the world find solace and meaning therein. Then I might ask the children to recall the Sesame Street song, "One of these things is not like the others, One of these things just doesn't belong." I think they would recognize that the flag is not a church symbol like the others. Obviously Christian churches in Canada, South Korea, or Iraq do not find the presence of the American flag necessary for the worship of God. So why do some American Christians?

1. In 1942 the General Assembly of The Presbyterian Church in the United States of America recommended that the Christian flag should have the "place of honor, worthy of the kingdom for which it stands, and should never be subordinated to any secular flag." This resolution conflicts with a law passed by Congress, which reads, "When displayed from a staff in the chancel of a church, or on the speaker's platform in a public auditorium, the flag should occupy the position of honor...." There is no solution. You either violate our Flag Code or you place a national symbol in a place of honor higher than the religious symbols.

Since 9/11 love of country has become the ultimate concern of many. And I hasten to note that I, like most Americans, was deeply saddened by the horrors of that day. I was reminded of my deep and heart-felt appreciation for this great land. I found myself teary eyed when I heard the song, "Proud to be an American." For some that American pride became an ultimate concern. Paul Tillich said, "Idolatry is being ultimately concerned about that which is not ultimate." I do not believe that love of country—any country—constitutes an authentic ultimate concern.

What is the greatest sin our country is facing today? Materialism? Greed? Self-righteousness? Too much wealth in the hands of the few as the prophet Amos condemned? Are we too quick to judge a neighbor with a speck in his or her eye? Many are wrestling with demons related to all of the above. But I suspect that idolatry is our greatest sin: We are making other gods greater than the God of Christianity. Worship of the U.S.A. is idolatry.

This year our congregation held a Good Friday Service. I went to every religious bookstore in Springfield, Missouri (sometimes called the "buckle of the Bible Belt") in search of worship bulletin covers with a cross on them. There were none. There were several varieties of Easter bulletins - how can the church celebrate resurrection without sharing in Christ's suffering and death? I was troubled by the seeming lack of interest in the cross. I was more troubled by the fact that the *one* cross I found had a U.S. flag draped around it. There was also a worship bulletin cover showing a flag covering a communion table with a Bible sitting on it, and another with the minister wearing a flag around his shoulders!

Moses is still calling out, *You shall have no other gods*. But we love our golden calf.

I didn't understand the problem of patriotism until I was a student at Harvard Divinity School, studying biblical ethics with a visiting lecturer. He was a large man with a German accent. One day at the end of class his demeanor changed. I do not recall the question asked of him, but I will never forget his reply. He told us that when he was a young man, his country called him to serve. He was a Christian, like most Germans. He loved his country, like most Germans. He served. Silence filled the room. With a strong yet repentant voice he declared to us the truth he had learned the hard way, closing the class with this sentence: "I am convinced that Nationalism is the greatest evil known to humankind."

Tempted to hang our American flags—and do the obeisance such flag-waving fosters—we dare not forget that the Nazi flag stood at the altar of the Christian churches in Germany.

From the biblical teachings it is clear that God is above any ruler, king, president, or other authority, or symbol. Jesus was willing to criticize both the precepts of his religion and of his government. They killed him. Jesus made a distinction between God and country, as is evident in his words, "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and render unto God the things that are God's" (Luke 20:22). Standing the flag in the sanctuary where the worship of God is the goal diminishes the distinction between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of this world. We cannot serve two masters. We cannot serve two gods. Caesar's symbol does not belong in the sanctuary.

THE GOD OF ALL PEOPLES

"But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ". Phil 3:20

"So God created humankind in God's image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." Gen 1:27

"There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." Gal 3:28

In I Peter, God's people are called "aliens and exiles"; in Hebrews they are called "strangers and foreigners on the earth." Christians pray, as did Jesus, that the kingdom of God will come on earth, as it did in heaven. We must be able to see the difference between the kingdom of God and the kingdom called the U.S.A. Our nation is of this earth. The Catholic Church understands that at death it becomes quite clear that

one's citizenship is not tied to any country: the Order of Christian Funerals Number 132 states, "Any national flags or the flags or insignia of associations to which the deceased belonged are to be removed from the coffin at the entrance of the church. They may be replaced after the coffin has been taken from the church."

Such a practice reminds us that we are all citizens of the earth. As citizens of God's kingdom, we inhabit an order constituted by all the nations of the earth. Which must necessarily lead us to question our nationalistic practices: How can a Christian ever pray for the victory of our nation and the defeat of another? In worship, how can we fly flags carried into battle, which symbolize victory for the winners and humiliation for the losers? Flags divide and separate people into countries, friends, and enemies. But the church is to be a sanctuary where unity and peace are preached and practiced; in God's house we are to pray for the enemy and forgive those who persecute us.

Do we really believe that God created *all* humans in God's image? Do we really believe that "in Christ there is no East or West," there is no "Jew or Greek"? From God's vantage point there are no national boundaries. The creator uses no maps delineated with our arbitrary geographical and political markers, but we accept such markers as having great importance. Does God prefer Iowa to Nebraska? The placement of the "Welcome to Kansas" sign is a result of ultimately trivial historical circumstance. Does not our flying the American flag in worship suggest that God prefers American over Iraqi?—a delineation having no more ultimate significance than Texan or Tennessean. Yet our U.S. government sends our troops into battle, armed with weapons and the flag, indoctrinating them to hate the enemy. Jesus calls us to go into the world unarmed, loving our enemy and our neighbor. Love of neighbor is inclusive love. Love of country is exclusive love. For God so loved the *world*... Do we really believe Jesus died for the *whole* world, or just our little corner? Can you imagine a U.S. flag in heaven?

Alexander Campbell wrote in *The Destiny of our Country*, "Patriotism, it is conceded, has no special place in the Christian religion. Its founder never pronounced a single sentence in commendation of it. The reason is that the world was his field, and as patriotism is only an extension of the principle of selfishness, he deigned it no regard; because selfishness is now the great and damning sin of mankind. We are commanded to love our neighbor as we love ourselves...our neighbor is every person in the world."²

The all-inclusive love of God is a central theme in Christianity. The church is universal. But flags in churches do not point us to this God of all nations, rather to an idolatrous god of one nation. Churches must guard against *any* symbols, acts, or words in worship that lead us toward a religion of nationalism and away from the central message of Jesus and its power to redeem and unite a broken world. Through the clamor of the crowd we can barely hear the call of Jesus challenging us to be citizens of a different kingdom. In the kingdom of God it doesn't matter if you're Jew or Greek, Iraqi or American, Chinese or Palestinian, male or female. For we all are one in Christ, created by a God who loves us all.

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2. Alexander Campbell, "The Destiny of our Country," *Popular Lectures and Addresses: No. VII.*, 184. The address was delivered for the Philo-Literary Society of Canonsburg College, Pennsylvania, August 3, 1852.