

# Flags in the Worship Space

## I. Recent statements

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- A. Recent decades have seen a shift away from displaying flags in the chancel or in any part of the church proper (as opposed to the entryway or fellowship hall). The definitive resource on Lutheran worship in WELS states:

Some churches like to include the national, Christian, and denominational flags in the chancel. While many Lutheran congregations have displayed flags of one sort or another, building committees ought to carefully analyze this tradition. Altar, pulpit, and font "all point to Christ," while national flags "speak not of Christ, but of the nation." Especially in an age when so many Christian churches confuse the separate roles of church and state, it may be wise to place national flags in the narthex rather than in the chancel. The use of the Christian flag may promote an imprecise view of the church and a false ecumenism besides.

*CW:Manual*, NPH 1993, p85. Quotes are from Bruggink, *Christ and Architecture*.

- B. Even more forceful is this comment:

Many Lutheran churches display flags in the chancel or nave, but this practice must be discouraged. The national flag is a symbol of the state whose values and purposes are different from, and sometimes incompatible with, those of the church. The "Christian flag" is a piece of redundant and distracting symbolism, since the focus in the church is on the altar and the cross in the chancel.... If congregations insist on having [flags], they should be displayed in the narthex or fellowship hall.

*The Altar Guild Manual*, Lee Maxwell, CPH 1996, pp45-46.

- C. An even stronger statement reinforces attention to symbolism in worship:

How did we ever start putting the American flag up front, where symbolism is most important, despite the fact that the people of God gathered for worship belong to the communion of saints in all places and times? And the "Christian" flag? It's actually an invention of a Methodist Sunday school society at the turn of the century. Do we not find God's ordained symbols (pulpit, table, font) sufficient for proclaiming Christian unity? "Why Sacred Space Matters," Michael Horton. *Modern Reformation*, May/June 1998. [www.alliancenet.org/pub/mr/mr.html](http://www.alliancenet.org/pub/mr/mr.html)

[Lutherans emphasize that the primary symbols are for proclaiming and delivering the gospel rather than for demonstrating our unity. Only in a secondary way is the focus on unity, since in the Holy Christian Church (the "Invisible Church") **all** believers draw their life from the gospel delivered at/from these symbols.]

## II. Historical development

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- A. Flags have not always been displayed in church.

1. The display of a national flag is a short-lived tradition. Lutherans never did this prior to World War I, and then only in America.
2. German Lutheran churches seem to have begun displaying the American flag during and after World War I or World War II to make clear that they were loyal to the United States. The perceived need for such evidence was perhaps stronger when worship was conducted in German.

### III. Why the shift?

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- A. The second half of the 20th century has seen greater attention to ideals and principles of church architecture and symbolism. This attention has asked more clearly than in the first half of the century "What is best?" and not only "What is traditional?" For example, neo-Gothic design was once the unchallenged ideal. Now, the weaknesses of that design are recognized along with the strengths.
- B. Lutherans have strengthened their conception of the chancel as that place from which God's gifts in Word and Sacrament are delivered to his people. The symbols of Word and Sacrament should be clear and strong to function as signs and symbols of heavenly realities. An example of strengthened focus is a common desire for baptismal fonts to be larger and more prominently displayed (e.g., at the front of the center aisle, rather than off to the side and "out of the way.") Clearer focus is also achieved by omitting extraneous symbols in the chancel.
- C. The flag is not a symbol that communicates how God acts *in the Church*. "The flag of the United States is primarily a national symbol, not a religious one. It is as at home in a ball park as in church." (Paul Nelson, "Are Flags Appropriate in Church?" 1996/99.)
- D. Altar, pulpit, and font "all point to Christ," while national flags "speak not of Christ, but of the nation" (*CW:Manual*).
- E. A narrow discussion of flags is best understood in a wider discussion of the entire chancel. *CW:Manual* states: "Whatever is placed in the chancel ought to neither replace nor compete with the altar, pulpit, and font as the focal points for the worshipers." The entire paragraph on page 84 is worth studying.

### IV. "Two Kingdoms"

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- A. *CW:Manual* quoted above comments on possible "[confusion of] the separate roles of church and state." As American citizens, we value – from a *political* viewpoint – the freedoms and blessings that have come from the separation of church and state. But even if we did not live under such a political system, we would still – from a *biblical* viewpoint – want to maintain the doctrine of the two kingdoms as best as we could.
- B. Separation of church and state emphasizes the *political* notion that the state should not seek to influence the church and that the church should not rely on the state to carry out spiritual goals. The doctrine of the two kingdoms emphasizes the *biblical* teaching that God operates through both the state and the church. Luther called the state "the kingdom of God's left hand" and the church "the kingdom of God's right hand." These two are to be kept separate not only for political reasons but also for spiritual reasons.
- C. A WELS pastor comments: "A flag is a symbol that represents a certain segment of a divided human race. It does not represent God, God's Word, God's sacraments, or any divine truth. And we ought not foster an incorrect notion that our nation – much as we love it – is God's favorite."
- D. The doctrine of the two kingdoms is there for our good. It neither diminishes patriotism in the kingdom of the left hand nor "Americanizes" the nature of the church in the kingdom of the right.

## V. Current context

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- A. In post 9/11 America, it may be difficult to evaluate the display of the American flag in the church/chancel. Patriotic sentiments are rightly running high. But clarity on preferences and locations for displaying the flag will help to bring clarity on the nature of the church and the way God chooses to operate in our lives in both "kingdoms."
- B. Thus discussion of displaying the flag is not divided between those who are more patriotic and those who are less patriotic. Christians affirm the importance of patriotism in the kingdom of God's left hand even while recognizing that different priorities and principles apply in the kingdom of his right hand.
- C. A familiar slogan highlights the different loyalties or priorities in the church and in the political/patriotic arenas.
  - 1. "United we stand." While this is a wonderful and powerful sentiment for national unity in the face of national enemies, it is not a significant statement within Christian worship. The *spiritual unity* we affirm as Christians transcends national borders. And, sadly in a sinful world, it is a unity we emphatically do *not* share with all Americans, not even with all Christian Americans in the "visible church" this side of heaven. Note the comment from *CW:Manual* about "false ecumenism."
  - 2. As a citizen of the kingdom of God's left hand, the Christian appreciates national unity but does not work for this unity in the church. As a member of the kingdom of God's right hand, the Christian appreciates (even more!) true spiritual unity, a unity that transcends national unity.
  - 3. God has blessed us with the gift of transcultural spiritual unity in the "invisible church" that transcends national borders. We are one with Palestinian and Pakistani Christians – and with all true Christians from Islamic countries and every other country.

## VI. Conclusion

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- A. It is best not to display national flags in the chancel or in other places within the worship space.
- B. Due to the sensitivities and emotions attached to a symbol of our nation, it is probably best to reconsider placement of flags during a new church construction project, renovation, or remodeling.
- C. Since display of the American flag is a matter of adiaphora – neither commanded nor forbidden by God – Christians willingly accept the will and wisdom of a general consensus within a parish either to display or not display the flag in the church.

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Later  
See also Horton: Beyond Culture Wars. Schaeffer quote, footnote 19.