

Should American flags be in church sanctuaries?

In times of heightened patriotism or in the weeks surrounding patriotic

holidays, the Baptist Joint Committee often receives inquiries about the propriety of flying the American flag in church. Should American flags be displayed in Baptist churches? The short answer is yes, but only in certain places and at special times.

Of course, this practice does not constitute a constitutional violation. The First Amendment's Establishment Clause bars government endorsement of a religious message; it does not prohibit a church from endorsing a patriotic symbol. The objection to the routine display of an American flag in the sanctuary is that it represents an act which, for some, including me, raises serious theological concerns.

At worst, the placement of an American flag at the front of the sanctuary can result in "flag worship" — a form of idolatry. At best, when the American flag is placed alongside of the Christian flag, it signals equivalence between the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of Caesar. Christians know that this is not the case. **We are citizens of two kingdoms.** We are to respect our governmental institutions and pray for our governmental leaders, but that must always be secondary to our commitment to God. Faith in God is superior to love of country; allegiance to God transcends all nationalism.

In any case, displaying the American flag in the sanctuary in America diminishes our ability to reach out to non-Americans. It sends an unfortunate signal to believers and unbelievers alike from around the world that somehow the Kingdom of God and the United States of America are either the same or are on equal footing.

Even if it is not advisable to display the flag routinely in the worship

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center, there are other opportunities to show and celebrate the flag.

Here are several ideas:

1. It is appropriate to display the flag, even in the sanctuary, on special occasions.

These include the day of worship closest to the Fourth of July when we celebrate our country's independence, religious freedom day when we express gratitude for the freedom we enjoy as Americans, and yes, even in times of national crisis and mourning. However, even then, the flag should be positioned in a way that does not signify equivalence with the Kingdom of God.

2. It is also fitting to display the American flag along with flags from other countries.

The symbolism would signify unity with Christians throughout the world, appropriately displayed on World Communion Sunday, for example.

3. The flag can be displayed routinely in other parts of the church campus not devoted to the worship of God.

This could include the fellowship hall, assembly rooms and other places where it can be seen and appreciated but where it does not threaten to displace the cross as the quintessential symbol of Christianity.

A healthy sense of patriotism is good. But we are Christians first and Americans second. When these words are used together, "Christian" is the noun; "American" the adjective. Our symbolism in worship should reflect that theological truth.

This is adapted from Walker's October 2001 column in Report from the Capital titled "Patriotism surge raises questions about use of flags in sanctuaries."



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— J. Brent Walker