

10 Reasons Why U.S. Flag Should Not Be in Your Sanctuary

Some Christians think having the American flag at church is just fine or at least “no big deal.”

And many ministers believe getting the flag out of the church is not worth the fight with those who predictably will insist on its presence and cling to it, come what may.

But it is a much bigger deal than most are willing to admit and it’s worth the fight to get it out of church. Here are 10 interrelated reasons why.

1. Every time a flag is placed in a sanctuary, the nature of the church is denied.

The flag declares the church is American, not just in America. The flag says something important about who the church is, not just about where it is.

But while what the flag in church says is important, it is not truthful. A church that is true to its God-given nature is not American.

It is global, even in its local manifestation, and no symbol, song or gesture should suggest otherwise.

2. Every time a flag is placed in a sanctuary, we are being told to identify ourselves more with other Americans than with other Christians outside the U.S.

It says, "We come here as people united by an affection for America - and God." Displaying the flag is a way of announcing who we are most deeply attached to and to whom we owe more to than we do to other people.

We may care for others elsewhere, Christians and otherwise, but Americans have priority, not those who share our faith but aren't our nationality. If faith genuinely has priority, the flag has no place before the worshipping community.

3. Every time a flag is placed in a sanctuary, a wall is built in worship that says to everyone not affectionately attached to the U.S., "You really are not one of us."

A lovely hymn reminds us that "in Christ there is not East or West, in him not South or North." The flag in church says otherwise.

It is a symbol that by its very nature excludes some while including others. Anyone disaffected with America are outsiders, not truly one people fully united with us, regardless of their love and loyalty to Jesus.

But how one feels about America should have no bearing on their full welcome in worship.

4. Every time a flag is placed in a sanctuary, it is being suggested that the U.S.

has a special place in the heart of God.

This idea has no basis in anything but the misguided faith of the misguided nationalistic imagination.

No amount of quotes from early Puritans, colonial preachers, presidents, Supreme Court justices or revivalists proves God has a covenant with America.

Only God can initiate a special covenant, and no divine revelation has disclosed any such relationship with America. But a flag in a sanctuary suggests such a thing.

5. Every time a flag is placed in a sanctuary, Christians are being told to identify the cause of America with the cause of God.

America, we are told, is for the freedom of religion. Supposedly, without America freedom of religion would be at jeopardy.

Hence, supporting America, particularly in times of war, is virtually equivalent to supporting worship and the life of faith.

America's wars, some think, are wars that preserve religious freedom. But, in fact, they are not and never have been. This is a myth pushed by certain kinds of preachers and politicians alike.

6. Every time a flag is placed in the sanctuary, the message is proclaimed, “Loyalty to God and allegiance to this nation are interchangeable for Christians.”

This idea naturally follows from the previous point, the conviction that America’s cause is God’s cause. The flag in worship says that real faithfulness is faithfulness to God and country.

Yes, in the pledge of allegiance the words “one nation under God” are found, and many Christians believe that means the nation is on the side of God, a dubious conviction. The flag in worship glues God and nation together.

7. Every time a flag is placed in a sanctuary, another story than the Christian story is being evoked.

The flag is not just cloth with colors and a certain design. It summons a narrative, a story.

It may be a story of freedom. But it is not the story of freedom from sin and death in Christ. It is not the story of the freedom to serve lovingly, rather to be served.

It may be a story of sacrifice in battle. But it is not the story of the nonviolent sacrifice of Jesus at the hands of the powers-that-be for the sake of the world. Rather, it is a competing story that misshapes the Christian story.

8. Every time a flag is placed in a sanctuary, the glorification that belongs to God

alone is shared with the nation.

The mere presence of the flag in a place of worship, surrounded by the symbols and sounds of faith, fosters an emotional attachment to the flag and what it symbolized and lends sacred honor to the nation the flag represents.

God does not receive greater glory by the presence of the flag in worship. However, the flag and the nation to which it points are elevated. The purpose of worship is thereby distorted.

9. Every time a flag is placed in a sanctuary, nationalism is reinforced.

What is promoted is not identification with the realm and reign of God as the defining reality of life. Rather, what is being promoted by the flag is love for the people and place of America above every other people and place.

Nationalism is in fact a religion. And its rituals, symbols and songs are tools of spiritual formation, not the spiritual formation of wholehearted discipleship, but of fully devoted citizenship.

10. Every time a flag is placed in a sanctuary, the capacity of Christians to resist policies and practices of the nation in order to be more faithful to God is weakened.

When Christians are accustomed to seeing the flag given a place of honor

alongside the cross and amid the atmosphere of worship, the critical distance between God and nation is diminished.

And when that happens, the capacity of Christians to discern when the nation is fundamentally at odds with the will of God is undercut.

That which should be seen as morally repugnant by disciples of Jesus becomes acceptable if “national interests” are at stake.

Bombing strangers, torturing suspected terrorists, turning away refugees, separating migrant children from their parents will all be accepted as necessary costs of security.

Any local church that believes nothing should distract from single-hearted devotion to Jesus, and that the unity of the church in worship and service should not be compromised by any other attachment or loyalty, must rid the church of the flag - for the glory of God.