

Raising the flag for Jesus

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In many sanctuaries and chapels where the gospel is preached, a Christian flag or cross is displayed along with a national flag, whether in the United States or in another country. The juxtaposition of these symbols of allegiance has significant implications for a theology of preaching. This paper contends that placing the Christian flag in a superior position strengthens the evangelical call to live faithfully under the reign of God, with allegiance to Jesus Christ above all other powers.

The following question sums up the central concern that motivated this paper: **How can we more faithfully preach the biblical claim that Jesus Christ of Nazareth, the crucified and risen One, is Lord of our personal lives, the church, and the kingdoms of the whole world?**

To address this question, I shall begin with the testimony of two seminary students, since it was their experience that prompted me to write this paper. Secondly, I shall look briefly at the biblical mandate for preaching a theology of the kingdom. Thirdly, I shall examine the challenge that we face for preaching the Lordship of Christ in the North American Church. Finally, I shall call for the use of any flags in Christian sanctuaries as visual aids that fully support the evangelical call of primary allegiance to the reign of God as expressed in the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

Stories of students that inspired this paper

I was first moved to consider the connection between flags and preaching by the testimony of two students attending seminaries well represented at the Evangelical Homiletics Society. The first student was a pastor in his late twenties, commuting to seminary while working nearly full time as a youth pastor in his home church. In his regular walks across the seminary campus, he couldn't help but notice that there were two flags flying on the campus flagpole—a U.S. flag and a Christian flag. Further, he observed that the U.S. flag was flying on top. He was somewhat disturbed, assuming that the superior position of the national flag on the pole symbolized superior power or allegiance. He wondered why the Christian flag wasn't in the superior position on a Christian campus. When he posed the question to one of his course instructors, the professor agreed with him in principle, but said he wasn't about to suggest that the seminary change its practice. He suggested instead that the student could visualize the reversal of the flags in his mind.

The second student was a middle aged women. She also commuted to a seminary campus, taking fulltime classes in preparation to be a chaplain. She was a devout Christian, deeply

involved in the life of her church and married to a secret service agent. Upon graduation, she commented to her graduating class that previous to her study with a particular theology professor, she had never given any thought to the concept of *first* being a Christian, and *second* being an American. She had subconsciously thought of them as synonymous or of equal importance.

After hearing these stories I wondered to what extent our seminary students hear the evangelical call to confess Jesus Christ as Lord. What call to allegiance do people hear in the sermons preached in their churches? To what extent do the symbols we display in our chapels and sanctuaries convey a message consistent with our sermons proclaiming the lordship of Christ?

The Biblical mandate to preach the kingdom

Jesus came preaching the kingdom of God. His first recorded “sermon” was a call to repentance and an invitation to follow him in living under the reign of God. (See Matthew 4:17, Mark 1:15). Jesus visibly brought the government of God to bear on earth. He exercised a three-fold ministry – “teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people” (Matthew 4:23)¹. In his teaching, particularly in his Sermon on the Mount, he explained the nature of life in the kingdom. In his preaching, he called for ultimate allegiance to the kingdom, even willingness to die for it (Luke 14:25-33). In his healing, he demonstrated his authority to reign in the kingdom.

His Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20) was a call to go to all nation groups collecting people for the kingdom of God. Jesus began the commission by declaring “all authority has been given to me.” That’s kingdom language. Then he said, “go make disciples. . . . teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.” That’s also kingdom language. He expected all of his followers to live daily under his authority. The church of Jesus Christ has at times been so preoccupied with preaching a message of salvation (justification by grace through faith) that it has neglected to proclaim Christ’s call to discipleship and kingdom living.

At the feast of Pentecost, God’s government emerged with great power. The Holy Spirit transformed a small community of disciples and enabled them to be witnesses to Jesus. They demonstrated the power of the Spirit through teaching, preaching and healing, just as Jesus had done.

As people responded to the gospel, the apostles formed churches- or “communities of the kingdom.” Within a few decades, these communities spread all across Asia and Europe. The entry into these churches required one primary and indispensable confession – “Jesus is Lord.” (See Paul’s declaration in Philippians. 2:9-11.)

This confession also reflects Peter’s clarion call to repentance on the day of Pentecost: “Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ, (Acts 2:36).

It also reflects the apostle Paul's call to bow before Jesus: "Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him a name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father," (Philippians 2:9-11). Again, Paul declared with supreme confidence that the risen Christ was seated at the right hand of God, "far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come," (Ephesians 1:21).

From the beginning of the Christian church, followers of Jesus have wrestled with questions of primary allegiance. If Jesus' followers were to give their allegiance to Christ as Lord above all other powers, how then were they to express their loyalty to the powers of government where they found themselves on earth?

The Apostle Peter addressed this issue in his letter to Christians who lived under the dominance and direction of the Roman empire.

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul.

Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right.

Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honor the king. (1 Peter 2:9, 10, 13-14).

Peter's words were written to give specific guidance to people who were suffering under an unjust government. Although the church had spread to many parts of the Roman empire, it was not officially recognized by the government as a legitimate religion. Therefore, Christians toward the end of the 1st century A.D. were a persecuted minority. It's not that the government cared that much about religious life. Most Roman citizens in the first century worshipped or prayed to many gods, whether Greek or Roman.

In some governments, such as those in ancient Babylon or Persia, the king had demanded worship as a god. The book of Daniel recounts the rousing story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refusing to bow down in worship to the king. The king's servants pitched them into the fiery furnace for their disobedience, but God vindicated them by rescuing them from the heat of the flames.

In early Rome, it was different. Like the United States today, Rome was a Republic, with elected officials who represented different parts of the empire. The emperor had a good deal of authority, almost like a king. But he was not worshipped.

However, by the time of Christ, the Roman emperor preferred to be called master and god. Upon the death of Augustus Caesar in A.D. 14, the Roman Senate declared him a god to be

worshipped by the people. That posed a real difficulty for Christians, who believed they must reserve both “master” and “god” for members of the Trinity.

“Before the fourth century, about the time of the Roman Emperor Constantine, most Christians thought of themselves as God’s nation, made up of both Jewish and Gentile believers, living among the nations, yet strangers among them (1 Pet. 2:11-17; Heb. 11:13-16).”² Today many Christians live in similar circumstances as the Roman Christians. They face threats of imprisonment or death in a hostile environment. Some researchers believe that as many Christians have died for their faith in the last century as in the previous 1900 years.

Many Christians in persecuted minorities understand well the truth reflected in the following quotations from the Confession of Faith from a Mennonite Perspective:

The only Christian nation is the church of Jesus Christ, made up of people from every tribe and nation, called to witness to God’s glory³ (Revelation 7:9).

Even at its best, a government cannot act completely according to the justice of God because no nation, except the church, confesses Christ’s rule as its foundation.⁴

Church and state are separate and often competing structures vying for our loyalty. We understand that governments can preserve order and that we owe honor to people in government. But our ‘fear’ belongs to God alone (1 Peter 2:17).

When the demands of the government conflict with the demands of Christ, Christians are to ‘obey God rather than any human authority’ (Acts 5:29).⁵

The challenge we face in North America

In North America, we live in a different milieu. Many of us as Christians have so largely accommodated to mainstream American culture and identified so completely with our nation’s interests that we can no longer imagine ourselves as “aliens and strangers.” As the story of the second seminary student above illustrates, many Christians simply do not differentiate between the kingdom of God and the United States of America, which still honors Christian faith in some dimensions of life.

The hard reality is that many of us do not reflect kingdom living -- the Lordship of Christ -- even in our own personal lives. I cannot help but agree with Ron Sider, who concluded that "evangelical Christians are as likely to embrace lifestyles every bit as hedonistic, materialistic, self-centered, and sexually immoral as the world in general." In his recent book called *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience*, Sider shows how deeply contemporary evangelical Christians have compromised the faith spoken of in the scripture.

For example, as Evangelicals, we promote sexual abstinence before marriage. The program called True Love Waits signed up several million teenagers. But a massive recent study found that 88% had broken their promise.⁶

As Evangelicals, we have “enthusiastically endorsed President Bush's Faith-Based Initiative to allow faith-based organizations equal access to government funds to run social programs

that empower the needy.” But for more than thirty years our annual percentage of giving to our churches to fund and run these faith-based social programs has dropped—even as our annual incomes have grown larger. Only six percent of born-again Christians give the traditional tithe of 10%. The average for evangelicals is a mere two-fifths of a tithe.⁷

Movements like Promise Keepers have emphasized the importance of building relationships between Anglos and African Americans. But “in a Gallup poll survey on how people respond to having a black neighbor, evangelicals were more racist than everybody else.”⁸

As Evangelicals, we have traditionally emphasized holiness of life and staying away from sexually provocative modes of entertainment. But statistics show that evangelical Christians are just as likely as non-Christians to be addicted to pornography or to rent pornographic pay-per-view movies in hotels. One hotel reported a Christian convention of youth pastors rented the highest percentage ever of such movies when meeting there.

As Evangelicals, we defend the family and speak about the importance of marriage. But “numerous polls show that evangelicals and born-again Christians . . . divorce at the same rate as—or slightly more often than—other Americans. And, according to pollster George Barna, 90% of all born-again folk who are divorced did so *after* they accepted Christ!”⁹

While there is no guarantee that faithful preaching will turn around this sorry state of affairs, I worry, however, that it may have been brought about partly because of a wrong focus in evangelical pulpits. As Charles Marsh declared: “The gospel has been humiliated because those of us entrusted with the mission of proclaiming repentance and salvation to the nations have decided that there are more important things to talk about. We would rather talk about our country, our values, our troops, and our way of life; and although we think we are paying tribute to God, when we speak of these other things, we are only flattering ourselves.”¹⁰

Particularly as our nation wages a war on terrorism, we feel the deep need to express our love and support for our homeland. Since the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center, evangelical churches have taken the lead in demonstrating patriotism, displaying the American flag in their homes, businesses, and churches. After my wife and I attended a neighboring church as guests, we were presented a refrigerator magnet with the name of the church and its pastor in the shadow of a large American flag. Although this congregation has a strong emphasis on soul-winning, there was no overtly Christian symbol on the magnet. In some Christian bookstores, there seem to be as many artifacts displaying American flags as there are items that display the cross or other overtly Christian symbol. Many items juxtapose the American flag and the cross.

This paper invites us to consider the nature of the message that we proclaim with such overt use of a national symbol in the witness of the church. I am concerned, along with Marsh, that “we have turned God into an appendage of the American way of life, acted with utter contempt toward the global evangelical and ecumenical church, and at times even presumed that the military powers of our nation act in vicarious representation of Jesus Christ the Lord.”¹¹

Perhaps because of a preoccupation with our own security as a nation, we evangelicals have forgotten one of the truths proclaimed in the Lausanne Covenant in 1974. There is perhaps no evangelical or ecumenical statement that expressed so eloquently the global nature of the gospel and the mandate of God's church to proclaim it to the nations. Under the leadership of John Stott, the framers of the statement declared that "the church is the community of God's people rather than an institution, and must not be identified with any particular culture, social or political system, or human ideology."¹²

This point was dramatically illustrated for me during the handover of Hong Kong from British governance to Chinese rule on June 30, 1997. I was in Hong Kong on that occasion by invitation of a group of Christian churches deeply worried about the implications of the change in governance for their religious freedom. Their worries were exacerbated by reports of Chinese tanks lined up at the border, standing ready to enter Hong Kong as soon as the handover was complete. Heavy rains kept many people, including my hosts and me, away from the site of the celebration. We chose to watch the event on television to the sound of rain assaulting the windows in a tall apartment building. But I shall long remember watching as Prince Charles lowered the British flag for the last time and the Chinese hoisted the Hong Kong flag. The next morning, I preached the gospel to a Christian congregation. I chose to preach a message on allegiance, encouraging the church to remain loyal to the one who had called them into his eternal kingdom.

It is instructive to note that over the centuries and in varied places, the Christian church has grown dynamically in many countries directly opposed to its presence. At Eastern Mennonite Seminary, I have heard from students the personal stories of evangelical believers imprisoned, beaten, or otherwise persecuted for their faith. Most dramatic are the stories of the *Meserete Kristos Church*, founded by Mennonite missionaries in Ethiopia. In early 1982, the Marxist government arrested and jailed the national leaders, seized church facilities, and forbade the congregations to meet for worship. For six years, the church lived underground. Small groups met in secret gatherings to avoid the watchful eye of the kebele, a neighborhood association of Marxists. During this same time, they sent evangelists into new areas of the country where they established house fellowships. A decade later, the communist party lost power and the church was free to worship in the open. When the small groups emerged and members of the whole church were counted, they found that the church had grown to many times its earlier size.¹³ Applying the spiritual and practical lessons they learned while underground, the church has continued to multiply, even drawing a significant number of converts from Islam into their Christian fellowship. It is common for the church to increase by ten or even twenty percent per year. Although the members of the church would not wish for persecution on anyone, they testify to the power of the Holy Spirit to build the church in the face of government opposition.

It is equally instructive to observe that some of the darkest times in Christian history have occurred when Christians took up arms in misplaced allegiance to a seemingly Christian cause. I am most sobered to observe that some German Mennonites, abandoning a peace tradition stretching back to the Radical Reformation, chose to join Hitler's forces in World War II. They served alongside other Christian soldiers who died in the German cause, which as most vividly remembered now for the evils of the Holocaust. An uncle of mine from the

Amish tradition served as a relief worker in Europe at the end of World War II. He walked onto a battlefield and cut the belt buckle off the frozen body of a soldier as a souvenir. The inscription on the buckle said: “*Gott Mitt Uns*” (God with us).” To read these words of allegiance in the language of his own worship tradition impacted my uncle deeply. Reflecting together on that war, he and I have wondered how our German brothers and sisters in faith could have been so misled. I tremble to think that believers from other countries around the world may someday ask me or my faith family that same question in regard to wrong choices based on misplaced allegiance.

Visual displays consistent with the gospel of the kingdom

The call in this paper to “raise the flag for Jesus” is a reminder that as preachers of the gospel, we must call God’s people to give our primary allegiance to Christ. As Christians, we are first of all citizens living under the reign of God, which extends to every tribe, nation, and people. Yet such preaching will ring hollow unless the visual symbols of our allegiance align with the verbal message that is being preached. It is like a pastor preaching on the value of simplicity or modesty while wearing ostentatious jewelry and a Rolex watch. Or it is like the flirtatious preacher expounding on the value of marital fidelity. Many of the values now associated with the American way of life, such as conspicuous consumption and preoccupation with wealth and personal comfort, run counter to the message proclaimed by Jesus the Messiah.

Flag display

Most of the congregations in my Anabaptist faith tradition choose not to display a national flag in church settings. This decision is based on convictions arising both from our understanding of scripture and our long tradition of the separation of church and state. As evangelicals in the tradition of the Radical Reformation, we eschew images and practices that meld church and state in Constantinian fashion. We believe the best way to symbolize the primacy of the kingdom of God over all other loyalties is to use only explicitly Christian images of allegiance in places of Christian worship.

Of course, many congregations in various Christian traditions choose to display an American flag along with a Christian flag in their places of worship. These two symbols of allegiance take their place alongside other visual displays in the worship setting as a means of proclaiming the beliefs and values of the congregation. The placement of any of these symbols, I assert, carries as much symbolic meaning as the symbol itself. The juxtaposition of two symbols, such as the cross and the flag, also has particular meaning.

The framers of the United States Code understood well the symbolic value of the United States flag and its position vis-à-vis other flags. The primary interest of the code is to engender proper respect for the official symbol of our nation. Two pertinent citations from the Code follow:

- (c) No other flag or pennant should be placed above or, if on the same level, to the right of the flag of the United States of America, except during church services

conducted by naval chaplains at sea, when the church pennant may be flown above the flag during church services for the personnel of the Navy. No person shall display the flag of the United Nations or any other national or international flag equal, above, or in a position of superior prominence or honor to, or in place of, the flag of the United States at any place within the United States or any Territory or possession thereof: Provided, That nothing in this section shall make unlawful the continuance of the practice heretofore followed of displaying the flag of the United Nations in a position of superior prominence or honor, and other national flags in positions of equal prominence or honor, with that of the flag of the United States at the headquarters of the United Nations.

(k) When used on a speaker's platform, the flag, if displayed flat, should be displayed above and behind the speaker. When displayed from a staff in a church or public auditorium, the flag of the United States of America should hold the position of superior prominence, in advance of the audience, and in the position of honor at the clergyman's or speaker's right as he faces the audience. Any other flag so displayed should be placed on the left of the clergyman or speaker or to the right of the audience.¹⁴

Although he was not familiar with the official flag code, the seminary student who observed the national flag flying top of the Christian flag on the seminary campus was intuitively right. The superior position on the staff or halyard indicates superiority in rank or respect. The permission granted to Navy service personnel to fly the church pennant in the superior position during church services also seems to acknowledge that ultimate allegiance is at stake. How then can Christian pastors display the national flag, whether in America or elsewhere, present a consistent visual message of primary allegiance to the kingdom of God as demonstrated through Jesus Christ?

While the pastor of an evangelical church in Toronto, Canada, David MacFarlane¹⁵ demonstrated one way this can be done. A powerful pastor/evangelist, he attracted people from many nationalities to his congregation. As part of an annual Sunday evening service, he invited a representative of each different nation to carry their national flag on a lanyard. I was moved to tears as I witnessed men and women from 32 different nations process to the front of the sanctuary and place their flags in a semicircle on the platform. I saw reflected in their faces the pride of identification with their country of origin. Pastor McFarlane understood well the importance of respect for his people and their homeland.

After the flags were placed, Pastor McFarlane preached a sermon, followed as always by an evangelistic invitation. In this worship service, I saw a visual consistency with the Biblical message that Christians are called to *first* of all be followers of Jesus, and *secondly* members of a nation.

Attendance at a church like McFarlane's with an international dimension helps to underscore the global nature of the body of Christ. When the words of 1 Peter about being "aliens and strangers" are read, people readily identify with the message. The Canadian self-perception as a "cultural mosaic" encourages people to own and value their national identity. Perhaps

immigrant peoples in the US, a nation which lives by the metaphor of a “melting pot,” experience more pressure to become American. It makes me wonder how this shapes the way they hear the gospel preached in evangelical churches with the United States flag displayed in a place of prominence or position of superiority to a Christian flag or symbol. I would not relish the assignment of standing before the throne of Jesus Christ to explain why a congregation under my charge had chosen to do so.

Pledge of allegiance

Most Christians in the United States have opportunity to pledge allegiance to the United States flag, whether at athletic, business, civic, or church-sponsored events. Building on this tradition, Methodist pastor Lynn Harold Hough American in 1908 wrote the first known pledge to a Christian flag depicting the cross of Christ. The use of this flag has since become quite common. The pledge has been revised since it was first drafted and is currently recited in various forms. The use of this pledge of allegiance in church services can indeed serve as one visual and ritual reminder that Christ is the one to whom we owe ultimate allegiance.

Notably, the national pledge of allegiance contains the words “one nation under God.” These words themselves point to God as the One to whom we owe ultimate allegiance. Might that truth be appropriately symbolized by a reversal of the usual flag position, so that the Christian flag was in the superior position? Imagine the power of the symbolic message conveyed by a Christian flag flying on top of the United States flag on the campus of a Christian school. Imagine the symbolic value of the Christian flag displayed on the right of the preacher who declares the reign of God above all powers. This is *not* a call for any less respect for the American flag or the great nation for which it stands, but rather the very highest respect for the visual symbol of our ultimate allegiance as Christians.¹⁶

Finally, I suggest the following verbal pledge to accompany our action of “raising the flag for Jesus.”

I pledge allegiance to Jesus Christ,
and to the kingdom for which he died
one redeemed holy nation under God
indivisible
with love, peace, and justice for all.

Notes

¹ All Bible references are from the *New International Version*.

² Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective, p. 86

³ Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective, p. 85.

⁴ Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective, p. 85

⁵ Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective, p. 87

⁶ Ron Sider blog citing his book.

⁷ Sider.

⁸ Sider.

⁹ Sider.

¹⁰ Marsh, Charles, *Wayward Christian Soldiers*, Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 8.

¹¹ Marsh, p. 27.

¹² Cited in Marsh, p. 56

¹³ The story is told in detail in *Beyond Our Prayers*, by Nathan Hege, Herald Press, 1998.

¹⁴ United States Code, Title 36, Patriotic Societies and Observances, Chapter 10, 175, Position and manner of display, (k) <http://www.usflag.org/uscode36.html>

¹⁵ MacFarlane is now Director of National Initiatives for The Evangelical Fellowship of Canada

¹⁶ It should be noted that the code for flag display is merely a guide for all handling and display of the Stars and Stripes. **It does not impose penalties** [emphasis theirs] for misuse of the United States Flag. That is left to the states and to the federal government for the District of Columbia. Each state has its own flag law.