

The Flag in the Presence of the Cross -- by Pastor Al (July 16, 2013)

I have been reading the discussion about the American flag and the desire of some to move it into the worship space. I would like to offer my opinion and insight into this discussion and to challenge my fellow Band of Brothers and Brothers of the Cloth to reflect and perhaps meet to discuss this further. It is obvious that there is much passion on both sides of the question and I propose we try to establish some understanding and come to a place that provides room in our community for both positions. To that end I offer the following regarding this specific issue.

Looking first at Scripture: When the people of Israel fled from Egypt and received the Law from God through Moses, they carried God with them in the Ark of the Covenant. When they camped, they erected a worship center (the Tabernacle) according to specific instructions from God as to size, architectural features, and decoration/accessories. Later, when the Temple in Jerusalem was built, specific and detailed instruction was followed in the structure and decoration of the Temple. In the case of the Tabernacle and later of the Temple, nothing was to go into the worship space that was not prescribed by God. This meant for the Jews that no non-secular coin, garment, flag, vessel, or decoration of any kind was allowed in the Temple lest they become the focus rather than God. Thus the reason for the money-changers in the courtyard. This has impacted the church at large even today in many denominations. The ELCA statement cited by Pastor Mark reflects this dictate albeit not as dramatically as the Old Testament. The ELCA statement wants the focus to be on God and God alone and thus discourages anything that might deter from that focus.

Second, let us look at early Christianity. As the church grew from house gatherings to larger gatherings, a few symbolic symbols emerged: the fish that in Greek is ICHTHUS – an anagram for Jesus Christ, Son of God; the cross – the reminder that Jesus died and has risen from the dead (there is a curious argument as to whether the proper cross is empty or contains the crucified Jesus, but that is another story); the cup and the bread – the elements of the Holy Supper. These symbols became common in the church universal.

Third, let us look at the purpose of the American flag. As a national symbol, the flag represents a number of things. First, it represents thirteen colonies that banded together to form a separate country. Second, the stars represent the states and the height to which men reach. Third, the colors have meaning as follows: red – hardiness or valor, white – purity, blue – vigilance or perseverance (“Our Flag”, 1989, House of Representatives). As a symbol the flag serves to remind us of the legacy of our historic past and the fundamental values of this country. There is a code for display of the flag and courtesy toward the flag. The flag may be flown on/in all public buildings. It may also be displayed on/in private homes. There is no statement in the code regarding the display of the flag in churches.

As to my own opinion I offer this. I like many others fought for the principles embodied in the symbolism of the flag. I fly the flag on a flag staff in front of my home. I stand and salute at the

passing of a flag in a parade. In fact there are many traditions regarding the flag that I still adhere to as a citizen and as a veteran. However, I must say that in combat, I never prayed to the flag.

It is true that I owe allegiance to the flag as a symbol of this country. I pledge that allegiance when it is appropriate. I always will, just as I will always honor my oath of allegiance to defend the Constitution of the United States.

More important to me, though is the allegiance that I owe to God. I wear a cross to remind me whose I am. In order of rank, God comes first in my life, my family is second, and my country is third. I am last on the list.

The church is my island of safety and renewal. It belongs to God. The flag has its place in my life, but not in the worship space. The church, like me, belongs to God.

I love the passion of my comrades – those in arms and those of the cloth. Our passion springs from the basic values of love inspired by God and manifested in Jesus Christ. We believe those same values inspired the foundations of this nation. There is a place for us to use this passion for the benefit of all people. I believe we can continue to accommodate that passion and honor both country and God by leaving the flag at the entrance to the space dedicated to the glory and worship of God. Borrowing an idea from one of our colleagues here, the flag, as a focal point into the entrance of the worship space, is like a guardian of that space. I can enter in the comfort that through God, this country still protects my freedom to worship as I will.