

Sun., July 5: Holy Communion, Fourth of July Weekend

Message Series: FAQs: Your Questions Answered with Biblical Facts

Message Series Theme Verse: Psalm 119:130

Message: “FAQs #1: Can We Have the American Flag in Worship?”

Memory Verse: “The unfolding of your words gives light; even the simple become wise.” -Psalm 119:130

Scripture: Romans 13:1-7

Blurb: This Sunday we begin our new Summer message series: “FAQs: Your Questions Answered with Biblical Facts.” This week our question is if it is appropriate to have the American Flag in worship. This is a fitting question for the 4th of July weekend, and the fact that we return to our sanctuary for worship. We will have our American flag there: come find out why!

Prep: Greeters outside, handing out bulletins & Holy Communion elements.

Doors propped open.

Every other pew roped off.

Offering plates available as people leave

OPENING MUSIC: *Questions (You Are Faithful)* -Sanctify

WELCOME -Pastor David

MEMORY VERSE -Pastor David

“The unfolding of your words gives light; even the simple become wise.” -Psalm 119:130

WORSHIP MUSIC SET -Sanctify

Lift High the Name of Jesus

My Country 'Tis of Thee

White Flag

Worship Prayer -Pastor Andrew

GENERATIONAL BRIDGE: “Bible FAQs” -Pastor Andrew

MESSAGE: “Can We Have the American Flag in Worship?” -Pastor David

PP#1: FAQs: Your Questions Answered with Biblical Facts

Can We Have the American Flag in Worship?

“We want to become wise in God, so we look for the light in the unfolding of God’s Word!”

-Psalm 119:130

Today we begin our summer message series: “Frequently Asked Questions: Your Questions Answered with Biblical Facts.” Most Sundays I pick out the message theme and Scripture. I intentionally try to preach from the most important and needed spiritual truths for our lives as Christians: I try to keep the Bible’s main themes our main themes. But this summer I’m letting you choose the messages we preach on. What are your issues, topics and questions that you would really benefit from hearing what guidance the Bible offers for how to live faithfully?

The Bible doesn't give direct answers for each issue we face. Instead, the Bible's purpose is the sufficient revelation for human salvation, for how people can be restored to God and abundant life. That's the main point of the Bible. But in doing that, the Bible also gives us guidance for how to live faithfully as God's people. It's a guide for holiness of heart and life, living God's love.

So, what life issues or questions would you really appreciate some Biblical guidance on? Shoot me an email or leave me a message. We've already got some of our messages set, but there's still room for more.

Our series theme verse is our memory verse: "The unfolding of your words gives light; even the simple become wise." -Psalm 119:130 We want to become wise in God, so we look for the light in the unfolding of God's Word!

PP#2: *Image of an American flag in the front of a church sanctuary, with a big "?" above it.*

Today, I take up a question that I've been asked a number of times, amid all the calls to remove political statues. Is it appropriate to have the American flag in worship.

Now this is a question with a lot swirling around it. The American flag is a symbol of our nation. We are people of the American nation, most of us legal citizens, I would suspect. What is our relationship with our nation? How patriotic are Christians to be? Do we show respect for our nation by showing respect for our nation's symbol? Is there value in showing disrespect to our flag as a way to protest injustice in our nation? Is divine worship the right setting for people to stand up and pledge our allegiance to our nation? And there are some Christians who wonder if God's people should pledge allegiance to any authority save God alone. Wow, lots going on.

I will, like every week, try my best to give the best biblical answer I can to our questions. But right off the bat, we are in the realm of application since the Bible doesn't talk about flags. And that means that faithful Christians may have different answers to this question.

PP#3: *Image of a church or sanctuary looking very patriotic.*

Some faithful Christians draw on the Bible to hold that citizens should be fully supportive of their nation and that worship is an appropriate place to ask God's help in being faithful citizens. They sing patriotic hymns in worship, pray for God to bless their nation, and pledge allegiance to both God and their nation while in worship. Good citizens show support for their country when they worship. There are also some unhealthy views on this side: especially the belief that God blesses America *above* other nations, and that America has a special place in God's eyes.

PP#4: *Image of people taking an American flag out of church or it stored away in a church closet.*

Far to the other side are Christians who see no room for patriotism in worship. Worship is a time and place focused solely on God. When we officially join in God's presence in worship, we transcend temporal boundaries and join as citizens of God's spiritual Kingdom. The worship sanctuary is a place spiritually set in God's kingdom, not in any earthly nation. So it is inappropriate to fly a particular nation's flag in worship. And many here are leery of praying for God's blessing on one's country, much like praying for one sports team to win over another...after all, God is the God for the people on both teams...all are God's children!

There is the history that for many churches, the flag came into the sanctuary during high patriotic times, such as during WWI. The recently created Christian flag was brought in to sort of

balance that out. Yet the debate raged about which should be higher, as flag protocol says that the national flag should be displayed the highest, to show highest honor. Who gets highest honor?

During the Civil War, flags were used in churches to flush out who was on which side, even in the same family. During the world wars, churches and pastors who refused to hang the flag were accused of being enemies and actively persecuted. Some churches were burned down.

And then there are the historical nightmares of governments meddling with Christian worship. Most famously, perhaps, is Nazi Germany, in which the government mandated that the Nazi flag be flown in churches during Christian worship. It was a way for the government to conscript support and show of national pride in what it deemed was a public setting.

PP#5: 2nd picture at <https://bitterwinter.org/xi-jinping-portraits-replace-catholic-symbols/>

This is true in our day, too, for just this past winter, the Chinese government mandated that the picture of the president of the Communist Party be hung in state-sanctioned Christian churches during worship, along with propaganda such as “Follow the Party, Obey the Party, and Be Grateful to the Party.” As in Nazi Germany, non-compliant churches are threatened with being shut down.

So, what’s the difference between that and flying the American flag in worship?

PP#6: *Image of Paul in prison.*

Well, let’s go to the Bible and get some facts. What does the Bible say about a Christian’s relationship with his or her government? Perhaps the best passage is Romans 13. This famous passage is used to justify obedience to proper government authority, paying taxes, and capital punishment. And it’s helpful to remember that this is written to Christians in the capital city of Rome, during the early empire—sometime in the late AD 50s—at a time when the Roman empire and government was totally pagan, and it was written by Paul, who was a citizen of the Roman Empire, who faced non-stop persecution by government authorities, and was finally executed by the Roman government! Given his context, what he writes is pretty amazing.

PP#7: Romans 13:1-7

1 Every person should place themselves under the authority of the government. There isn’t any authority unless it comes from God, and the authorities that are there have been put in place by God. 2 So anyone who opposes the authority is standing against what God has established. People who take this kind of stand will get punished.

Romans 13:1-7. “Every person should place themselves under the authority of the government. There isn’t any authority unless it comes from God, and the authorities that are there have been put in place by God. 2 So anyone who opposes the authority is standing against what God has established. People who take this kind of stand will get punished.”

Now, we need understand that Paul is not talking here about *agency*, but *authority*. God hasn’t directly establish each government throughout history. God didn’t directly set up Nazi Germany or Communist China or even American democracy. Instead, Paul is talking here about authority. All authority belongs to God, and comes from God. There is no authority that is not allowed except by God’s permission. The Bible says this all over the place, like Proverbs 8:15-16 where God says, “By me kings rule, and princes issue righteous decrees. By me rulers govern, and officials judge righteously.”

So, God usually doesn't set up governments, but God allows governments to be set up. They rule using God's authority over people, and that authority is supposed to be good and life-giving. The difficulty is that God also allows human selfishness, and doesn't always stop it from hurting others, even in leaders. But more on that in a couple of weeks! So, Christians are to be subject to God's authority wielded by their political governments, even if pagan like Rome. If you want to know what to do if you find yourself with an evil government, you need to read the Rev. Dietrich Bonhoeffer and how he discerned God called him to help plot Adolph Hitler's assassination.

PP#8: Romans 13:1-7

3 The authorities don't frighten people who are doing the right thing. Rather, they frighten people who are doing wrong. Would you rather not be afraid of authority? Do what's right, and you will receive its approval. 4 It is God's servant given for your benefit. But if you do what's wrong, be afraid because it doesn't have weapons to enforce the law for nothing. It is God's servant put in place to carry out His punishment on those who do what is wrong.

Verse 3, "The authorities don't frighten people who are doing the right thing. Rather, they frighten people who are doing wrong. [Again, this is true in a functioning government.] Would you rather not be afraid of authority? Do what's right, and you will receive its approval. 4 [The government] is God's servant given for your benefit. But if you do what's wrong, be afraid because it doesn't have weapons to enforce the law for nothing. It is God's servant put in place to carry out His punishment on those who do what is wrong." The Greek word for "weapons" here is "sword." The sword is not a defensive weapon, but a weapon to kill people. This passage, I think rightly in this context, is used to support capital punishment.

PP#9: Romans 13:1-7

5 That is why it is necessary to place yourself under the government's authority, not only to avoid God's punishment but also for the sake of your conscience. 6 You should also pay taxes for the same reason, because the authorities are God's assistants, concerned with this very thing. 7 So pay everyone what you owe them. Pay the taxes you owe, pay the duties you are charged, give respect to those you should respect, and honor those you should honor.

Verse 5, "That is why it is necessary to place yourself under the government's authority, not only to avoid God's punishment but also for the sake of your conscience. [Christians, for conscience sake, obey the government.] 6 You should also pay taxes for the same reason [Bummer! Well, the Bible doesn't always say what I want!], because the authorities are God's assistants, concerned with this very thing. 7 So pay everyone what you owe them. Pay the taxes you owe, pay the duties you are charged, give respect to those you should respect, and honor those you should honor."

"The authorities are God's assistants." So, biblically, Christians are to be good and productive citizens, in so far as it doesn't conflict directly with their higher allegiance to God. Now, we are blessed because we live in a country that allows for conscientious objection and protection for religious understandings. And when that fails to protect us, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. taught us the way of peaceful, respectful civil disobedience.

So, our relationship to our government, says the Apostle Paul—who had been in prison a number of times for his faith—be the government good or bad, is to be supportive and cooperating, even for conscience sake.

PP#10: FAQs: Can We Have the American Flag in Worship?1. Biblically, flying the flag is about *the why*

So, I think this means that for Christians, it is good to support our own local government, even while we honestly judge it by God's standards. It is okay to be patriotic, to rally, to—in our system—caucus, and fly your nation's flag...at least personally. I don't think it is biblical, however, that Christians **MUST** publically support their government or fly the flag. It is a matter of personal application of how to support your government. That support, for example, could be protesting and demonstrating peacefully. Supportive Christians may have good reasons why they choose to not stand at the flag or place their hands over their hearts or say the pledge of allegiance. Refusing to do so, for personal reasons, does not have to mean that they are not supportive of their government.

But, whatever personal reasons people have, what about flying the national flag *in worship*? I think biblically, it comes down to the reason why. If a local church chooses not to fly the national flag because they claim that the sanctuary is God's Kingdom and that all nations are equal before God, that is an acceptable Christian position. It does not mean that they don't support their government or country or that they are unpatriotic. It means for them that their worship space is dedicated to God only.

On the other hand, if a local church chooses to have the national flag because they want to lift up their country to God in prayer and ask for God to bless their government and leaders, that is also biblical. It would be appropriate to also have other flags in worship to remind worshipers to pray for other peoples' countries and governments, too. What would not be biblical is for worship to promote allegiance to a country or government, or for worship to claim special blessing by God for their government or country.

Here at Forest Hills, we keep our flag in worship in order to remind us to pray for our country and government and to ask God to make us useful citizens, but we put them at the rear of the sanctuary in order to keep them out of our focus of worship, which is always and only on God. We also sing hymns referencing our country, but we are careful that they are sung *to God* and draw us to pray for our country. We did that today, and now you know why!

So, your first application point: don't be upset by what a local church chooses to do about their nation's flag until you know the reason why. As always, Christians practice giving the benefit of the doubt. So, assume they have made a good biblical reason why they are doing what they are doing. You are free to disagree, but keep that conversation respectful. You are also within your biblical right to request a change in what your local church does with the flag, but do that respectfully and through proper channels. Don't stir up negative talk.

Also, don't judge your neighbor for what they're doing with the flag. Again, assume the best, and engage in respectful dialogue about it. We use the same conversation methods we learned about talking with others with whom we disagree.

PP#11: FAQs: Can We Have the American Flag in Worship?1. Biblically, flying the flag is about *the why*

2. Resist being easily offended; respond in grace

A second application point is to guard against being offended. Our current culture, it seems, is obsessed with being offended. It's hard, because biblically we are supposed to be offended about what God is offended about, such as injustice. But too often we use being offended as an excuse to be selfish and want things our way. Christians are gracious, and treat others graciously. If we are

offended, we first extend grace and give the benefit of the doubt. Proverbs 19:11 guides God's people to "restrain their anger; their glory is to overlook an offense." So, when someone offends you, your response is to be gracious about it. Be forgiving. And if you still feel the need to correct the injustice, do so respectfully and out of love, hoping to win them over, not just act out of your anger. Again, if a church—or a person—flies or refuses to fly the flag, don't be offended but assume they are doing it for biblical reasons, unless you discern otherwise. If so, then respectfully lift it up.

PP#12: FAQs: Can We Have the American Flag in Worship?

1. Biblically, flying the flag is about *the why*
2. Resist being easily offended; respond in grace
3. Talk respectfully of government officials, especially in public

Last application point: treat your country, your government, and your government officials with respect! God's people violate Romans 13 when they bash and malign government officials. Romans 13:7 says, "give respect to those you should respect, and honor those you should honor." It doesn't matter if you think the governor is incompetent, or can't stand the president, or think that our country is run by a bunch of monkeys. Remember, they rule by God's authority, and to mock them or say their name with disgust or dismiss them as idiots does not give them the respect or honor Paul says to give them! He doesn't say, "if they deserve it." They don't deserve it, but God does! So treat them with the respect that God's official deserves. Be a role model..and that's easy, because no one else is doing this. You have lots of opportunity to be the only person who speaks with honor of our government officials, especially in this campaign year! It's going to be a fun ride, and we get to live out our faith as Christians through it all! Will people see how Christians pursue holiness? They will if you do it.

Your activity this week ahead: worry less about your flag and more about your tongue. Every time you want to say something disrespectful about a government official, stop and pray for that person instead. Lift them to God. Then, reconstruct your words to be respectful. You don't have to agree or like them, but remember, God is listening, and they are His beloved children. Talk about them as though God is listening. After all, He is!

Amen.

HOLY COMMUNION: -Pastor David

Song: *Marching to Zion* -Sanctify

CLOSING SONG: *Rejoice* -Sanctify

ANNOUNCEMENTS -Pastor David

MEMORY VERSE -Pastor David

"The unfolding of your words gives light; even the simple become wise." -Psalm 119:130

BENEDICTION -Pastor David

CLOSING MUSIC -Sanctify