



Liturgical Thought

EXPLANATION AND GUIDE TO THE LUTHERAN LITURGY¹

Why are the flags in the narthex and memorial hall, not in the church?

I usually get this question at least once a year, and especially around our annual observances of Veterans' Day and Memorial Day. As a veteran of more than twenty years of service in the uniform of our country myself, I can assure you I am extremely sensitive to this issue. No one is more patriotic or has greater love for our nation and our flag and what they stand for than I.

As Americans, we should always show the highest respect and honor for our nation and our flag. There is no greater nation on God's green earth than that of the United States and there is no flag more beautiful; a beauty made even grander by the blood, sweat, tears, hard work and sacrifice of our people for the cause of liberty. Among the world of nations, none are founded on a greater precept—that all men are created equal.

For this reason it is meet, right, and salutary that an American citizen show the proper respect and protocol to our flag, such that an American should stand when our flag passes in parade or when it is being raised or lowered; display our flag only during the hours of daylight unless properly lighted; properly retire a flag that is worn or tattered; and never wear our flag as an article of clothing for puerile purposes (e.g., the wearing of the flag on the uniform of our military or police forces would not be considered improper, while wearing the flag as a decoration or accessory would be considered so).

Yet, our flag stands for the republic, that is, the people and government of the United States. While we pledge our allegiance to our flag and to all for which it stands, we are not pledging allegiance to God Almighty, even if we include the words "**under God.**" For the "**god**" of our pledge is a generic "**god.**" Indeed, he is a "**god**" to whom anyone can pray, in any place of worship, without the fear of offense. Thus, the Muslim, Jew, Christian, or anyone of any religious faith for that matter, can make the pledge of allegiance with a clear conscience free from guilt at having betrayed their faith.

¹ Much of this series on the Liturgy of the Church is found in *Why? A Layman's Guide to the Liturgy*, by Rev. Burnell F. Eckardt Jr., Repristination Press, (Malone, TX.), and first published in *Gottesdienst, The Journal of Lutheran Liturgy*, in a series by the same name between the years 1985-2005. Used by permission.

Such images were forbidden by God to be displayed in the Tabernacle or Temple. Indeed, the tumult and anger was so great against Rome when Caesar had his image placed in the Temple that he ordered it removed. While our flag is not a pagan image or symbol, neither is it a symbol of our faith in Christ. In fact, many might argue that the flag of the United States is an image of a country and government that has come to mock our God in its laws, such as, its support of the prohibition of Christian prayer in public venues, its support of abortion on demand, and advancing the homosexual agenda. Such things are certainly not God-pleasing, therefore they are not in accordance with our faith and confession.

The history of the Christian Church does not call for the tradition of displaying our national or any other flag for that matter. Such displays are only quite recent innovations. Still, according to American custom and tradition proper flag etiquette calls for the flag of the United States to take precedence wherever it is displayed. The national flag is never “*dipped*” in salute, it is always required to occupy the highest position, and is placed at the right of a stage or the right hand of a speaker, which is called the “*position of honor*” or “*the flag’s own right.*” All this is certainly proper in a secular setting, but in our worship is it proper to elevate our flag and nation above our God? Is it proper that our flag should take precedence over the signs and symbols of our faith? In such a case, is it not better that we should not display a flag at all?

Finally, our God is not the God of the United States in the sense that He is ours and ours alone. He is the God of all things, and all things, including nations, exist at His pleasure, even the United States. God is not a respecter of persons (Acts 10:34). He recognizes no race, ethnicity, or national origin. Rather, the Church is under the divine mandate to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in God’s Triune Name (St. Matthew 28:19). Should we, then, lay national claim on what is God’s by hanging a flag in our chancel and claiming God for ourselves alone? We must endeavor to remember that while we are Americans, we are Christians first and foremost. We do not call ourselves an American church; we are the Christian Church and we, like all things, belong to God.

*** Soli Deo Gloria ***