

Downside UP

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Of Flag, Faith, and Community: What To Do When You're at Odds?

Two years ago this month, I wrote in Downside Up and Presbyterian Outlook about what happened when I supported our minister and challenged our church's practice of having the American flag carried down the aisle and placed in front of the church on the Fourth of July – as well as certain other holidays.

As a result of these events, the pastor sought to initiate an open discussion of the issues by the church's administrative board, leading to adoption of a formal policy. If his hope was for a reasonable and sensitive debate in which both sides listened carefully to each other, he didn't get it. If he was dreaming of a policy reversing practice, he got the opposite. The bitter and angry discussion which followed exposed the fracture lying beneath the surface of the church community.

The Presbyterian Church (USA), like a few other mainline Protestant churches, is badly split over issues like the war in Iraq and the status of homosexuals in the church. (1) While this split tends to follow a north-south axis, our local church, with a fairly outspoken liberal minister and a mix of northern and southern-born members (2), has echoed the national division. In this case, however, the split was not actually very even: out of some 15 people at the board meeting, only three voted against a formal motion to carry the American flag down the aisle not only on the Fourth of July but also on Memorial and Veterans Days.

So here before me, in a single issue, is the question of what you do – what I do -- when you are at odds with your community because it -- church, homeowners association, town, state, country -- adopts policies and practices which you oppose, even abhor. Perhaps the flag issue is less prominent an issue because the split is so much less even than is the case with the place of homosexuals in the church or making war. Nonetheless, feelings run strong and clearly link to issues of making war.

The Problem with Flag and Country in Church, Synagogue, and Mosque

Opposition to parading, even displaying, the flag revolves around two basic points well-founded in the Bible, both Old Testament and New. First of all, are the injunctions in the Ten Commandments, Exodus 20: 3 & 4: "*You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.*" (New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).) Many more ritualistic churches, like the Catholic and Episcopalian, regularly carry the cross and other religious symbols down the aisle as a way of demonstrating their veneration of God.

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Similarly, displaying the national flag before an audience is a common ritual in secular patriotic ceremonies from football games to school assemblies, to say nothing of the panoramic video, fireworks, and massive music displays on the Fourth of July. (3) In both church service and patriotic event, we praise and express allegiance, sing "hymns," perform music, and march around. They both look like a duck, walk like a duck, and quack like a duck: the only difference I can see between the secular ceremony and worship is that the time and money spent on Fourth of July celebrations dwarf what happens in worship at any church, synagogue, or mosque – even the evangelical mega-churches. The Jehovah's witnesses probably have it right when they refuse to salute the flag or say the pledge of allegiance in any context. In response to such actions, Moses broke the tablets upon which God had written the Ten Commandments. (4)

Yet, as much as our Fourth of July ceremonies look to me like what God has condemned, the major point for me with our church is not condemnation of such secular ceremonies. My objection is to carrying those secular ceremonies into the church. Yes, I really do think the secular celebrations are heretical and idolatrous, and they often invoke God and tie God to country, but I am much more concerned about bringing country into church than church into country. (5)

This leads to the second basis for opposition to the ceremonial use of the flag in church and some other plain words from the Bible. In Genesis 28:21-22, Jacob says "*The Lord shall be my God, and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house.*" (NRSV) In this house, Paul declares in one of his famous letters (Galatians, 3:28): "*There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.*" (NRSV) Thus did Jesus welcome everyone equally into his circle: not only women (with whom, in the ancient Hebrew world, men did not speak publicly), Samaritans (roundly hated by the Jews), and Roman soldiers (gentiles and conquerors), but also tax collectors, lepers, sinners, and others held in low regard, indeed seen as unclean, in Jewish society. To wit, **in God's house**, there can be no nationhood because God is the god of **all** nations and **all** people. In God's house no nation can stand alone or above any other nation.

An Impassioned and Powerful Response

However strongly I feel about my position – and I do feel strongly -- it surely pales beside the heartfelt responses of those who, in 2003, wrote in opposition to the column I published simultaneously in Presbyterian Outlook and gave to members of the administrative board. Almost all the contrary responses conformed to the same pattern (6):

First of all, they entirely and absolutely denied the analogy I see so clearly between Fourth of July celebrations and worship. As one person wrote, "Respect for our flag and our country has absolutely nothing to do with my worship of God Almighty...Can you not see the difference between love and respect for your country and worship for [sic] God Almighty." (7)

Secondly, they referred, without exception, to veterans and people who fought for their country, often the writer himself, more often a relative. "There is no more Christ-like thing one can do than be willing to give up one's life for one's fellow man."

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And thirdly, they combined an admission that the United States has “made mistakes” with the strongest possible assertions about the United States as a great country, the best country, the most generous country. “My father was a devout Christian [who] fought for our nation to protect his family’s freedom and yours...No country has ever, or will ever, be perfect. But alone among the countries in this world the United States of America stands for justice and freedom for all...Never in history has a nation done so much to provide food, medicine, technological and disaster help to those less fortunate than us [*sic*]...The only time our flag is ‘an ugly thing’ as you put it is when it is seen through the eyes of those individuals who hate the freedom for which it stands.”

Echoes of George Bush and all, there are lessons for progressives. Much of what my respondent declares as fact is myth at best, demonstrably false for the most part, but I cannot imagine my saying so having any impact on her other than to increase her anger. It would be like blowing in the wind to explain that her own words perfectly demonstrate what she so adamantly denies: love of country, love of one’s fellow man, love of freedom, love of God, and God’s love for the United States are all tied inextricably together, wrapped in the flag, and carried forth as in “Onward Christian Soldiers,” the famous Civil War hymn -- now deleted from the mainline Presbyterian (USA) hymnal! (8) Against such devotion, my rather abstract notions will bear hardly any weight.

The Political Power of Patriotic Ideology

What we see here demonstrated is the awesome political power of patriotic ideology. When the President talks about the war in Iraq, he draws upon – and feeds back to – the deeply felt sentiments of most Americans. When he connects religious faith to freedom and freedom to country, and tells us that is why he is fighting a war, there is no wonder he gets votes. It is of no apparent significance or contradiction that Bush’s policies belie his assertions. Cleared away are Jesus’s words declaring all people to be God’s children and commanding his followers to turn the other cheek and love their neighbors, even their enemies.

As one of the respondents to [Presbyterian Outlook](#) said of “the Christian left”: “Lip service may be paid to how dear the USA is to them, but they inevitably end up by bashing their own country in just about every particular. The truth is that they see themselves as internationalists...We do have problems and troubles in America, [but] I have been overseas, [and] I thank God for this country [and] those who have helped to protect it, and for our great blessings.”

The question, then, is where all this leaves me. Indeed, our minister is retiring and I may soon face far more divisive issues dividing our church when we seek a replacement. When I feel strongly that my church, or my community at any level, has acted wrongly, what do I do? Do I stay and fight? Do I leave? Do I stay and not fight? Many readers of [Downside Up](#) have been asking themselves questions like these at least since the 2004 elections. I am sure that many evangelicals and radical Republicans were asking themselves these questions for many years before 2000. The splits, defections, and fallings-away of people at various times from all denominations and religions, churches, mosques, and synagogues tells us that many consider leaving their place of worship a viable option.

Yet it must boil down to what level of community you are talking about, what your options are, and how strongly you feel about an issue on which your community has taken what you regard as an erroneous stand. It must also depend upon your idea

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of what commitment means. Is it like a marriage whose bonds you break but only very reluctantly? Is it like a nationality to which you are born and will forever have, even if you move to another place and become a citizen of another country? Is it like buying a house where you get what you get as a homeowners association (not that great in my case), county (where my vote has no meaning in a one-party county), or state (where in Florida the Idiot Right dominates but voter registration is about equal between Democrats and Republicans).

On July 3, 2005, at the beginning of the service, as the bell tolls, I and one of the young women in our church will carry the Christian flag and the American flag down the aisle from the back of the church and place each in their usual place to the right and left of the altar. For this most civilian of all holidays, I asked for the responsibility and recruited a young woman to join me. There will be no cross in the procession. We will likely be the first non-veterans to carry the flag in our church. She will be the first young person and the first woman I have seen participate in this ceremony since I joined the church in 2001.

1. The Episcopal and United Methodist Churches are the other two principal examples of divided mainline churches. The United Church of Christ (made up primarily of Congregationalists) is more generally liberal and the Unitarian-Universalists flame!. Abortion also divides to some extent but, in contrast with evangelical churches like the Southern Baptists and other Presbyterian churches (as opposed to the Presbyterian Church (USA), the issue of women clergy was long ago settled in their favor. With respect to the place of homosexuals in the church, the Episcopal Church, which is run by a clerical hierarchy has famously voted to permit ordination of homosexual priests. The Presbyterian Church (USA), where representation in the "General Assembly" is split evenly among clergy and lay people, has voted (narrowly) against homosexuals serving as deacons or members (called "elders") of the administrative board (called the "Session").
2. If they are paying attention, living in the South should be a reminder to all Northern-born that many of this country's most important radicals were Southern and, despite the popular image of "Love It or Leave It" and racism, to be Southern is far from equivalent to being hostile to liberal causes.
3. The United States spends hundreds of millions, if not billions, of dollar every year on Fourth of July celebrations. One of the most spectacular is in State College, Pennsylvania, a small town that when I was there several years ago was spending \$250,000 on a combined fireworks and music extravaganza. The music is on the radio and even from a far distance you can see it timed perfectly with the fireworks.
4. It would be amusing, if it were not so manipulative and political, to see how evangelicals insist on a "literal" interpretation of the Bible while manipulating words out of context to condemn homosexuality or abortion. But God's plain words about killing or worshipping "idols" and "graven images" are readily ignored.
5. I would also keep God and church out of state-sponsored celebrations of country. Popular culture routinely misses the point about separation of church and state. The First Amendment bans laws tending to "an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." That is, it bans the meddling of the State in religion not religion getting involved in the State. Even churches as institutions should be able to get involved so long as they are willing to give up their tax-exempt status. There is no ban on individuals bringing their beliefs to bear on government policy. What's wrong with George Bush's faith-based initiatives is that he wants the state to support specific religious programs and this violates the establishment clause.
6. None of the letters written to me and the Session was supportive. Most published in Presbyterian Outlook were.
7. I draw here and below from what I thought was an especially powerful letter to the Session.
8. Yes, such devotion is a little ironic coming from a born-and-raised Southerner, but it sure beats such devotion directed at the Confederate flag. Some things have changed; the South is far from full of Confederate flags.

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Ronald Woodbury is the publisher, editor, and general flunkey for all of Downside Up. While publication benefits from the editorial advice of one of his daughters and occasional other pre-publication readers, they will, for their own privacy and sanity, remain anonymous. The web spinner's name is also best left anonymous.

Woodbury has a B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. in history and economics from Amherst College and Columbia University. In addition to many professional articles, he has published a column, also called Downside Up, in the Lacey, WA, Leader. After a 36 year career as a teacher and administrator at six different colleges and universities, he retired with his wife to St. Augustine, FL, where he continues to be active in church and community. He has two daughters, one a physician and one an anthropologist, and six grandchildren.