

RELIGIOUS & PATRIOTIC IMAGERY at Medway Community Church

At Medway Community Church (MCC) we are committed to expressing gratitude to God for our religious history, as well as our religious liberty. Simultaneous to this, we want to maintain an atmosphere of worship that is Biblically derived and God-exalting. Here is our current position statement on physical objects in worship, framed in a comfortable, Q&A format.

Q: Why doesn't your church use statues, pictures of Jesus, or other icons in the sanctuary?

A: At MCC, we hold to a Reformation era standard, called the Regulative Principle. Simply stated, this means we believe the best way to worship God is by using those elements that He has specifically shown us He wants. Therefore, you'll find in our worship services a healthy dose of prayer, singing, reading of Scripture, teaching, and the sacraments. At the same time, we try to steer clear of other elements that, while entertaining or enjoyable, aren't really indicated in Scripture as a means of worship that God invites. This same Regulative Principle, then, guides not only our activities, but also which objects we do and do not place in the sanctuary.

Q: The Bible doesn't say anything about using electricity, air conditioning, or pipe organs in worship. Don't you use those?

A: Excellent point! You could add to that same list hymnals, sound amplification, and bulletins among other things. Most reformed theologians draw a distinction between essential and non-essential elements of worship. Essential elements, like preaching and prayer, are central to the very act of worship. Non-essential elements are those peripheral items (like electricity and pew cushions) that support the act of worship, but are not fundamental.

In reality, the regulative principle is just that – a principle, not a law. We try to be thoughtful and Biblical about what we do at MCC, without crossing the line into legalism or wooden interpretations of the Scripture.

Q: So does this mean that in worship, you don't ever use pictures of Jesus, statues of Mary, images of the apostles or that sort of thing?

A: Right. When you walk into our sanctuary, you'll find an elegant room, but simple. Our walls are void of tangible objects or permanent ornamentation. Aside from a single cross, pretty much the only physical symbols you'll find in our worship are the ones Christ told us to use: water baptism and the elements of the Lord's Supper.

Q: So how does the regulative principle apply to patriotic objects, like a framed copy of the Constitution, a picture of US soldiers, or the American Flag?

A: It's really the same standard. We are an American church, and are tremendously grateful for our right to worship. Indeed, we are cognizant that the very freedom we have to worship is a gift from God, purchased by the blood of countless men and women in uniform. We gratefully and joyously fly the American flag on our property, while at the same time keeping our sanctuary, the foremost place of our worship, free of physical icons or emblems – both religious and national.

Q: Beyond the regulative principle itself, are there other Biblical references that speak to how God should and should not be worshipped?

A: There are many, but the fundamental passage is Exodus 20, specifically the 2nd Commandment. Here God prohibits the use of engraven images as a means for worship.

Q: Does the use of religious or patriotic imagery really result in outright idolatry?

A. Well, rarely in the sense of bowing down, or praying, to idols. However, when we define idolatry in broader terms – as allowing anything to supplant or eclipse God – we always want to be cautious. Just as ideas have consequences, so do items ... intentional or not.

For instance, placement of the Bible and the United States Declaration of Independence, side by side at the front of a sanctuary, would imply an equality. We recognize that placing an American flag beside a Christian flag, or beside the cross, will imply to some the same thing – that they are equal. As important as our national heritage is, nothing comes close the centrality of Christ crucified, and the Gospel of Jesus.

(Unanimously approved by Board of Elders, 8/2011)

