This report is intended to be a resource to help Fundamentalist Christians in studying and evaluating religious leaders and movements. It draws primarily upon materials housed in the Fundamentalism File in the J. S. Mack Library on the campus of Bob Jones University.

Although every effort has been made to provide an impartial study of the topic, this work will naturally reflect the interpretations and viewpoint of its author. This report should not be taken as representing an official statement of the position of Bob Jones University. The University’s theological position is well expressed by its creed.

The staff of the Fundamentalism File would welcome any questions or comments concerning the content of this report.
The Christian Flag

The Christian flag is found in churches across America. Students in Christian schools offer pledges to it during school assemblies. Most church-goers instantly recognize the banner with its white background, blue field in the upper left-hand corner, and red cross emblazoned in the field. Yet few are likely to know the history of the flag or of the controversies that have occasionally accompanied its display.

Origin of the Christian Flag

The Christian flag was devised almost by accident by Charles C. Overton, a Sunday school superintendent at Brighton Chapel, Staten Island, New York, on September 26, 1897. Overton had invited a special speaker for Rally Day, the annual promotion for kicking off a new year in Sunday school. When the speaker did not show up, however, Overton was forced into an extemporaneous address. Taking as his cue an American flag draped over the piano, he began to talk about flags and what they mean. Then, in a flash of inspiration, Overton suggested that Christians should have their own flag.

Exactly what followed is a little murky. Some sources say Overton actually designed and made a flag, which he used in the church on Staten Island. Other sources imply that he merely mulled over the concept and kept it in the back of his mind for several years. What is definitely known is that in 1907 he approached Ralph Diffendorfer, secretary to the Methodist Young People’s Missionary Movement, with his idea. Diffendorfer was also taken with the concept, and together they found a flag maker who produced the banner to their specifications.

The white on the flag represents purity and peace. The blue stands for faithfulness, truth, and sincerity. Red, of course, is the color of sacrifice, in this case calling to mind the blood shed by Christ on Calvary, represented by the cross. It is probably not coincidental that these are also the colors of the American flag, but as Dorothy Fritz notes, these colors “were also much used in the trappings of the Tabernacle,” so assigning a religious meaning to the colors is not out of place.

Diffendorfer began to take the flag with him to rallies and conferences to promote its use. At one such meeting, he expressed the wish that there were a pledge to the flag, like the one written for the American flag. A Methodist pastor in attendance, Lynn Harold Hough, volunteered to write one. Hough, a liberal who later served as dean of Drew Theological Seminary, wrote the following: “I pledge allegiance to my flag and the Saviour for whose kingdom it stands; one brotherhood uniting all mankind in service and love.” Diffendorfer changed “my flag” to “the Christian flag.” Conservative churches and Christian schools have generally adopted a different version of the pledge: “I pledge allegiance to the Christian flag, and to the Saviour for whose kingdom it stands; one Saviour, crucified, risen, and coming again with life and liberty to all who believe.”

Expansion, Opposition, and Controversy

Slowly, use of the flag spread among American churches. The Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. gave it formal recognition in 1942 when the General Assembly sanctioned its use “on appropriate occasions, in churches and during services of worship.” The Protestant Episcopal Church was less taken with the Overton flag and adopted its own official flag in 1940.

Some writers were absolutely dismissive of the flag. The editor of Christian Century in 1942 called it “an example of that capricious sentimentalism into which a certain shallow portion of our American Protestantism falls too easily. A ‘Christian flag’ in a service of Christian worship is an impertinent rival of the true Christian symbol,” i.e., the cross. A few months later, he repeated his criticism: “The so-called Christian flag is a bizarre and unmeaningful innovation. It is a needless irritant, more of a nuisance than a true symbol. Let its use be discontinued. Let the cross be the only symbol of the object of our worship and adoration!”

Display of the flag became more controversial during World War II, when Congress adopted standards for proper etiquette in displaying the American flag. The standards mandated
that the flag of the United States always be given the preeminent place when displayed with another flag. The legislation contained no penalties, and was therefore more of a courtesy matter than a statute, but it caused problems in some churches. More liberal churches in particular saw conflicts between clergy worried about giving preeminence to “Caesar” over Christ and congregations wanting to promote patriotism in light of the world war.  

Before Congress passed the legislation, the Federal Council of Churches had issued a resolution on January 23, 1942, stating that any religious symbol such as the cross or a flag should have “the place of highest honor” in all church displays. (It also officially recognized Overton’s Christian flag, but “only by general usage and not by official action of any ecclesiastical body.”) The council reaffirmed this decision after Congress passed the flag display act, but did so after the congressional sponsor of the bill assured them that the act was merely a question of etiquette and not law.

This clarification did not put an end to the controversies, however. In 1942 the First Presbyterian Church of Milford, New Jersey, was the scene of a battle pitting the pastor and the church board against the local chief of police. That officer came into the church and personally changed the flags to give the American flag the prominent place. The church promptly changed it back. The dispute gained the attention of the press and was finally settled by a compromise by placing the American flag on the right of the congregation (the place of honor according to Congress’s act) and the Christian flag on the minister’s right (the place of honor according to the Federal Council’s resolution). The police chief attended the first service in which this arrangement was used to show his approval of the compromise.

Nor did the disputes stop with the end of World War II. In 1955 Emerson Abts, a Methodist pastor in Ashville, Ohio, wrote to Christian Century of how he had changed his flags to give God the priority over the government. In so doing, he had drawn the wrath of the local chapter of the American Legion. He asked what he should do. Several correspondents replied, generally advising him to take both flags out. One wrote, “Emerson Abts asks whether any law supersedes the requirement that the American flag be always placed in a position of honor. I could think of one: ‘Thou shalt have no other gods before me.’” Another wrote, “Let him place the flags in the proper position according to his belief, and tell the American Legion where to go.”

Clashes on the Right Wing

If conflicts over the display of the Christian flag affected mostly the theological left in the 1940s and 1950s, it became more of an issue for conservatives after the 1960s. Liberals had never really embraced the flag, but many conservatives saw displaying it along with the American flag as a way of asserting loyalty to both God and country. The problem became not so much one of flag etiquette as it was more often a matter of municipal ordinances. But even in these cases, the dispute often seemed to boil down to a question of “Christ vs. Caesar.”

In Dallas, Texas, on July 31, 1983, Delbert Fields, owner of the Deeper Life Book Store, was cited for flying a Christian flag in front of his place of business. Authorities said only the flags of the United States and Texas could be displayed on flag poles and that any other flags violated the city’s sign ordinance. Fields put up a sign reading, “City of Dallas said we cannot fly the Christian flag. Keep us in your prayers.” He also sued, and supporters launched a petition drive. In September the city excluded the Christian flag from the ordinance, and Fields was able to fly it again.

In 1992 the Neuse Baptist Church in Raleigh, North Carolina, underwent a similar dispute. In this case, the church had been flying the flag for several years when the city ruled that it violated their sign ordinance. When the church was taken to court, the congregation acquired the services of Christian attorney David Gibbs. They not only defended themselves in court but also protested the decision publicly and inspired a letter-writing campaign to the Raleigh city council. After some skirmishing, the council adopted a new ordinance exempting the flag.

Conclusion

The Christian flag still flies in many churches, schools, and Christian businesses across America. Despite the fact that it has no official
sanction by any religious body, the flag has apparently won a place in the hearts of believers as a symbol of their faith. But exactly what it symbolizes will likely always vary with the individual. Segments of the homosexual community, for example, began promoting a “gay Christian flag,” in which the blue field and red cross were displayed not against the traditional white field but the multicolored homosexual “rainbow flag.” (Interestingly, this design means that the homosexual flag omits white, the color standing for purity.) As such uses of the flag and the history of the banner indicate, the Christian flag is a symbol of faith, but the nature of that faith varies—sometimes widely—with the person using the symbol.

Notes

1The best source on the origin of the Christian flag is Thomas A. Stafford, Within the Chancel (New York: Abingdon, 1955), pp. 56-61. Stafford reports (p. 57) that the account was given to him personally by Ralph Diffendorfer and confirmed by Lynn Harold Hough. A satirical jab at the history of the flag is found in Martin Marty, “Filling in the Time,” Christian Century, 17 March 1982, p. 319.


5Walter D. Cavert, “What About the Christian Flag?” Christian Century, 5 August 1953, p. 889. The ruling also mandated that the Christian flag be given the place of honor. Cavert notes that the PCUSA “in disregard of its own action, has since held its annual meeting in a sanctuary where the Christian flag was in secondary place throughout the entire convocation.”

6In 1997 the Episcopal flag became a center of controversy as well. Bishop William Wantland of Eau Claire, Wisconsin, copyrighted not only the Episcopal flag but also the name “Protestant Episcopal Church in the U.S.A.,” neither of which had been previously registered. Wantland, a staunch traditionalist, said he wanted to preserve both the name and the flag in the face of the increasing liberalism of the denomination and its departure from historic standards of orthodoxy.

The church hierarchy was forced to begin the difficult task of trying to recover control of its name and flag. See “Episcopalians Tangle over Name,” Christian Century, 7 January 1998, pp. 7-8.


9See “Congress Tries to Settle a Much Debated Question,” Christian Century, 2 September 1942, pp. 1044-45.

10See Wolcott Cutler, “Flags in the Chancel?” Christian Century, 23 February 1944, pp. 238-40; note also the responses to this article in Christian Century, 15 March 1944, pp. 340-41.

11The substance of this resolution is found in Stafford, p. 60.


14The original letter is found in Christian Century, 30 March 1955, p. 399, and the replies are found in Christian Century, 20 April 1955, p. 477.
