

What kind of allegiance does a flag demand?

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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While Rit Varriale has come in for some mockery among the left, I for one don't think he's *all* wrong. After holding a special ceremony at which his church raised the [Christian flag](#) above the U.S. one, the Baptist pastor [had this to say to the press](#): "If you stop and think about it, [flag etiquette] is inconsistent with what the Bible teaches us. We are first and foremost Christians who are called to serve the living God."

Well, yes! And this isn't an over-the-top, ["revolutionary action."](#) It's [not even a crime](#). So take the question in isolation—given that we're going to identify our church's allegiances with these two flags, which one should be higher?—and I absolutely agree with Varriale that it should be the Christian one.

But the question didn't arise in isolation, of course. And the specifics here are a lot less admirable than a theological claim for God over country, for at least two main reasons.

First is the context of Varriale's decision: the state officially disagreed with him on a specific public policy matter (same-sex marriage). His fundamental theological claim didn't lead, it followed.

Did it follow an assault on religious liberty? Not really. Yes, the cultural shift toward embracing SSM raises tricky questions about competing rights claims. But nothing in this SCOTUS decision threatens any church's right to define religious marriage for itself, because the decision is about *civil* marriage. You'd think this distinction would mean more to someone so invested in the difference between allegiance to God and to the state.

Not that Varriale is consistent in his defense of religious liberty. He [goes on to trace a line](#) from acceptance of LGBTQ people back to restrictions on school prayer. It's a good example of how the current religious liberty rhetoric rests uneasily alongside

the older conservative emphasis on a sort of quasi-established faith. And while Varriale is elevating the Christian flag at his church, [others are trying to keep the same flag flying over government buildings](#), again in tandem with the U.S. flag. So we have flags of church and state, flown together in both places—and apparently signifying religious freedom on the one hand and would-be establishment on the other.

Which leads to the other problem: a flag isn't really the best marker of Christian allegiance, anyway. While flipping the order of the two flags makes its point, it makes it using the language of nationalism, conquest, and civil authority—not exactly the way of Jesus. If national allegiance poses a theological problem, then why take its symbol as a pattern for a religious alternative in the first place? What's at stake is not just which flag demands higher allegiance, but the qualitative nature of allegiance to a flag.

“If a church already has a flagpole,” [suggests Varriale](#),

start flying the flags in that order. If they don't have a flagpole, go get one, and fly the flags in that order, so any person who drives by their church will see the Christian flag in the highest place and know they are driving by a church that has made the commitment to honor God before anything else.

Here's another idea: don't get a flagpole. But make sure you have a cross, and that people driving by can see *that*. And then try to pattern your church's life after the way of the cross. It's a much better pattern than you'll get from the two flags—whether a given political season finds you seeing them as allies or as rivals, and whichever one you decide to fly higher.