



CURRENT
ISSUES

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Christian Nationalism

**No one can serve two masters,
for either he will hate the one and love the other,
or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other.**

Matthew 6:24

Dear children, keep yourselves from idols.

1 John 5:21

What is Christian Nationalism?

Christian nationalism, briefly put, is an effort to impose on a nation one's understanding of Christianity and, given that view, its corresponding role in political, personal and social life. In America, after World War II, it was a powerful and zealous way to differentiate Christian America from Soviet atheism. Christian nationalism creates a synchronism between the Kingdom of God and nation-states. It is a form of civil religion that makes one's earthly, national citizenship, even if only inadvertently, equal to, or above, one's citizenship in the global people of God.

American exceptionalism is sometimes connected to Christian nationalism. America *is* exceptional in many ways—for instance, its diligent, but imperfect, pursuit of human liberty and equality and its entrepreneurial and compassionate spirit. But we are not in any way the special or exclusive focus of God's intention. America is not bringing in the kingdom of God. God, through Jesus and the sending of the Spirit to the Church, is doing that.

Devotion and Idolatry

John heard Jesus clearly: anything that takes God's rightful place of pure devotion in our hearts is an idol. And Christian nationalism does just that—it makes one's nation-state the focus of one's spiritual life. Christian nationalism—and the corresponding rise of *Patriot Churches*—is not *Christian*. It is precisely the opposite.

It distracts from following Jesus in his Divine conspiracy to overthrow evil from *every* nation (Revelation 7:9) and replace it with the good, creative intention of God. That cosmic story is the one that gives Christians identity and significance. That story includes America—and can include appropriate love of America—but the overall emphasis is worldwide.

What would happen if various nation-states began to insist that their particular people, with their unique history and specific borders, were the *true* instrument for bringing in the kingdom of God? At a minimum, counter to the aims of Jesus (John 17:21), it would cause destructive division. At a maximum, there would be religious wars. Christian nationalism is a prime example of the trouble that comes from *having a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge* (Romans 10:2).

Against Christian nationalism, the Bible portrays the Messiah as having the government on *his* shoulders...

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulders, his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
Isaiah 9:6

The ruling and reigning of Jesus, the Messiah, contrasts starkly with the rule of nation-states. Jesus is wonderful, not dreadful. He is full of wise counsel, not deceit, secrecy and lies. His governing practices emerge from eternal Fatherhood, not cycles of elected leaders. The leadership of Jesus is full of peace—not rancor, spite, anxiety and conflict. Choosing to follow Jesus versus the era-bound

claims of nation-states is one of the most consequential decisions human beings can make.

Jesus models this decision for us. When the devil tempted Jesus with *all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor*, Jesus turned him down via a value system that rebukes nationalism:

Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only...
Matthew 4:8-10

What About Political Entities?

Yes, we are to respect *political entities* (when Paul wrote Romans, modern nation-states were obviously not in view) as they are formed into various systems of government and their appointed/elected authorities. They are meant to be for human good, to facilitate human flourishing (Romans 13:1-4). Anarchy, mob rule or bullying populism are clearly not a blessing to anybody. Given the brutal, oppressive and failed attempts that have taken place over the millennia, the creation of a representative democracy, of and by the people, is a towering achievement.

Space does not permit all else that might be said about the interaction of church and state. But for our purposes here, perhaps I have said enough to provide background for these questions of reflective *examen*:

- What is your sense of covenant, of election?
- To whom have you pledged your allegiance?

To God, of course. Which then means that whatever nation-state we find ourselves in, we find our truest meaning and clearest orientation in being the people of God as he intended. The government of God is superior to all forms of government and their rulers. As Daniel sees in his vision:

*...the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that
will never be destroyed,
nor will it be left to another people.
It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end,
but it will itself endure forever.*
Daniel 2:44

This is the reason our scriptures view Christians as aliens, sojourners and exiles in one's nation-state (1 Peter 2:11). Scripture further implores us:

*That...our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a
Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.*
Philippians 3:20

*And to...set your minds on things that are above, not on
things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is
hidden with Christ in God.*
Colossians 3:2-3

We cannot know what God thinks about humans imposing modern nation-states upon his creation. And it is not for us to know how exactly he parcels out the good and bad in America. But we can know this: God's focus is on the whole world:

*The Lord will lay bare his holy arm
in the sight of all the nations,
and all the ends of the earth will see
the salvation of our God.*
Isaiah 52:10

God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son...
John 3:16

*Jesus Christ is the faithful witness...and the ruler of kings on
earth.*
Revelation 1:5

A People, Not a Nation

God's care for the whole world is expressed in the forming of a people to be his cooperative friends. This begins with the calling of Abraham precisely *from his country, his people and his father's household* so that—

*I will make you into a great nation,
and I will bless you;
I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing.
I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you.*
Genesis 12:1-3



The Seduction of Christian Nationalism

The emphasis on the Hebrew word for *nation* is on a *people*, not the modern political notion of a *state*. When the emphasis of *a people called for the sake of all the people of the earth* gets lost, the prophet Jonah is reminded that God loves all nations/peoples—including Nineveh (Jonah 4:10,11). Furthermore, foreigners, those not a part of one's nation, have a cherished place in the biblical narrative. For instance:

The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.

Leviticus 19:34

Thus says the Lord of hosts: Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another; do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another.

Zechariah 7:9-10

Then I will draw near to you for judgment. I will be a swift witness against...those who thrust aside the sojourner, and do not fear me, says the Lord of hosts.

Malachi 3:5

Jesus arose precisely within the values and priorities of a story of worldwide redemption. He said that the Church was correspondingly sent: *As the Father has sent me, I am sending you* (John 20:21). The story ends with the worldwide people of God serving with him in the new heaven and the new earth (Revelation 22:5). Put like that, nationalism is the sad and absurd reduction of a magnificent story.

God's *interest* is in the renewal of all things. Nationalism can therefore never be our north star. Following Jesus for the sake of *all* others is our mission and destination. The vision of the scriptures is global, not nationalistic. God created the world. The rulers of the world, doing the best they knew to do, created nation-states. That is not a bad thing—again, it seemed the right path to improving life for all. And the patriotism that springs naturally from the arrangement of nation-states is fine, in its place. But its place is third (at best) coming after 1) love of God, and 2) love of neighbor, especially the least, the last, the left out and the marginalized.

What do so many people find seductive about Christian nationalism today? In this space I can only name one powerful factor among many: the pace and scope of technological, economic, political, social (especially race) and sexual change. Everyone, based on their reaction to this change, feels like they no longer belong to an interrelated whole, that *the other half the country* is alien and remote. We need a solution, we need salvation, we need to be rescued, we need a revolution, we need a framework to help navigate our time of political turmoil and division. Enter Christian nationalism. Exit the global, every-tribe-and-nation purposes of God.

But we cannot go there. Fusing religious authority with political authority is idolatrous. Losing its love-the-other based purity, such fusions too often lead to various forms of oppression. It also kills genuine Christian spirituality.

Our focus is not on empire—and especially not anything that is economically exploitative, militaristic or demonizing to others. We must never let political parties radicalize the Church or cause us to react out of extreme views. What is truly *radical* is the Divine intention of God. That intention, expressed in the rule and reign of God, is the basis by which Jesus called for repentance in humanity. He wanted his hearers to rethink all their previous commitments based on his person and his message. The Kingdom of God as announced, demonstrated and embodied by Jesus, is an alternative political order which requires our complete allegiance. It leaves no room for nationalism.

Jesus' challenge was real. People knew it—they felt its power. It was not just religious or spiritual. It deeply impacted real people. For instance, rightly heard, Jesus' gospel of the kingdom would have challenged the escapism of the Qumran; it would have confronted the accommodating instincts of the Herodians; and it would have tamed the nationalistic, warrior spirit of the Zealots.

When Jesus spoke the parables of The Pearl and The Treasure, he was bringing to light the crucial question of where we put ultimate value and the basis for making fundamental commitments. Does the kingdom seem to you to be worth leveraging all your pearls and land to get it? Or must we hold out for a little religious nationalism, just in case?



Go in Peace to Love and Serve the Lord

The ultimate commitment of the Church is to “come follow me (Jesus)...as I show you how to live in the kingdom of God for the salvation, rescue, healing and renewal of all creation.” Such a faith can never be politicized in our current particular partisan ways. It is always *personalized* --local and specific: loving God and neighbor.

We are Christians first and Americans a distant second. Our calling is to the globe God created and placed us upon. The geopolitical stances and goals of our nation either aid or hinder God’s interests. But one’s nation is mere context. It is not *America* who will stand before the judgment seat of God, but you and me, giving an account of how we did within the global and local politics of our era.

My friend and colleague, Dr. Emily McGowin, sent me the quote below. It is from a sermon by Martin Luther King, Jr. I was happy to see that my thinking aligns with his:

One cannot worship this false god of nationalism and the God of Christianity at the same time. The two are incompatible and all the dialectics of the logicians cannot make them exist together. We must choose whom we will serve. Will we continue to serve the false god that places absolute national sovereignty first or will we serve the God in whom there is no east nor west? Will we continue to serve the false god of imperialistic greed or will we serve the God who makes love the key which unlocks the door of peace and security? Will we continue to serve the false god of racial prejudice or will we serve the God who made of one blood all men to dwell upon the face of the earth?

Today we need prophetic voices willing to cry out against the false god of nationalism. I realize that such a venture might bring about the possibility of being called many undesirable names. But speak we must if we are to acknowledge the sovereignty [of God]. Against the claims of the false god nationalism, we must affirm the supremacy of the eternal God of the universe, the Father of all mankind. This is the God we must worship if we are to sail through the tempestuous seas of confusion to the harbor of peace.

*Go peaceful
in gentleness
through the violence of these days.*

*Give freely.
Show tenderness
in all your ways.
Through darkness,
in troubled times
let holiness be your aim.*

*Seek wisdom.
Let faithfulness
burn like a flame.*

*God speed you!
God lead you,
and keep you wrapped around His heart!
May you be known by love.*

*Be righteous.
Speak truthfully
in a world of greed and lies.
Show kindness.*

*See everyone
through heaven’s eyes.
God hold you,
enfold you,
and keep you wrapped around His heart.
May you be known by love.*

Paul Field

