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Nation and Faith

Ezekiel 2:1-5
Mark 6:1-13

The book we're reading in our Wednesday study group discusses different perspectives of early Christianity on how to integrate faith and culture. This was an important question then, when followers of Jesus were living under the oppression of the Roman empire, and it's still an important question today.

How are we to live in the world as people who follow the teachings of Jesus? Do we reject and demonize our culture? Do we embrace and claim our culture? Or maybe we have a more uneasy relationship as part of our culture the same way our conscience is a part of our personality.

Today, I particularly want to reflect on one aspect of embracing the world around us because I believe it is a threat to both our nation and our faith. And that is Christian Nationalism, which embraces culture, wanting to remake our nation in its autocratic, fundamentalist, and narrow-minded image.

In this week when our country celebrated it's independence, many people find themselves increasingly concerned that we might be on the verge of losing the freedom we celebrate, that we are moving toward an autocratic rather than democratic government.

Sadly, many of the people seeking to put themselves on top of the power and wealth pyramid at the expense of others are doing so in the name of Christ. As followers of Jesus, we should find that disturbing and alarming.

Christian Nationalism¹ is the belief that America is and should be a "Christian nation," that there should be no separation between church and state as long as that church is a very specific brand of Christian.

Remember a few years ago at the height of Islamophobia when some people were warning us against sharia law taking over the government? Well, that's exactly what the Christian Nationalists want – a theocracy where their form of Christianity is forced upon the people.

Christian Nationalists seek a nation where everyone adheres to an ideal and ideology which is basically only going to benefit white cis-gendered men. Many women, the LGBTQ+ community, and people of color are worried. And they should be.

We can't claim that this would never happen in the United States, because we're watching it happen right in front of our eyes.

Our nation was not formed to be a Christian nation. It was founded on the principle that everyone should be able to practice their religion as they see fit and not be forced to support or adhere to someone else's ideas of religion. In other words, church and state as separate entities.

What's more, Christian Nationalism is not in any sense Christian. If one is Christian, they should exhibit the traits and teachings of Jesus in their lives.

In other words, they should be concerned about the welfare of the oppressed, not the welfare of the rich and powerful. They should be loving and kind and compassionate. They should be helping and supporting people, enabling them to live better and

¹ <https://act.faithfulamerica.org/signup/preachers-toolkit-christian-nationalism/>

more fulfilling lives. They should be working for justice for all people and for peace in the world.

Instead, Christian Nationalists actually encourage political violence. Here are a couple of quotes from people who are leaders in the group “ReAwaken America,” a group which holds massive rallies in churches around the country, legitimized by the presence of various ministers and three star general Michael Flynn. All of these quotes are from within the last three years.

Pastor Mark Burns has said, “You got to get to the point where you realize that when they smack you in the face, you smack them back two times harder! ... The Bible says the violent take it and we take it by force. We are here and ready to take this nation back.”

Bo Polny, referring to those he sees as liberal political leaders, said, "The angel of death is coming to visit these people. These people are going down."

And, Scott McKay, said, "This is war. It's gonna get bloody"

It's not just that group, either. Heritage Foundation president Kevin Roberts said that "we are in the process of the second American Revolution, which will remain bloodless if the left allows it to be."²

Yes, you can find in the bible genocide justified in the name of God. But, that isn't what Jesus teaches. Jesus tells us to turn the other cheek. When Peter struck out with a sword to defend Jesus, Jesus told him to put his sword away. Jesus teaches us to love our neighbor.

Christian Nationalism is not Christian. Their values have nothing to do with Christianity. Look at the so-called Project

² <https://www.mediaite.com/tv/conservative-leader-issues-cryptic-threat-to-liberals-says-second-american-revolution-will-be-bloodless-if-the-left-allows-it-to-be/>

2025 blueprint. They want to gut health care, remove protections against discrimination, and abandon efforts to mitigate climate change – and these are just a few of their harmful policy desires. Already this year, for example, the Human Rights Campaign has tracked more than 540 anti-LGBTQ bills introduced in state legislatures, 45 of which have been passed so far.

We could debate the merits of individual policies, but that isn't my desire. What I want to point out is that making it harder to get health care and easier to discriminate against people you don't like are policies based in the pursuit of wealth and power, not in Jesus' values of love, kindness, and compassion.

Christian nationalism seeks to force its particular brand of Christianity and whiteness on all Americans, using secular law to weaponize religion. It uses fascist tactics to stop Americans from reading books it doesn't like, demonizes LGBTQ Americans, restricts religious freedom for non-Christians through Muslim bans and abortion restrictions, and more. This is not love. This is coercion.

When Jesus sends his disciples out in pairs to the neighboring towns, he doesn't arm them with weapons. He tells them to take nothing with them but the clothes on their backs and their trust in God. And if a village rejects their message of healing and compassion, he tells them to leave and shake the dust of that village from your feet. In other words, forget about it and move on. Jesus didn't tell them to try to force the people to follow him and their ideas.

In fact, Jesus resisted the temptation for political power. When the devil offers Jesus all the kingdoms of the world, Jesus responds by saying, “Away with you, Satan! Scripture says, 'You will worship the Most High God; God alone will you adore.'”³

³ Matthew 4:10

Christian Nationalism is not Christian. It is the ideology of nationalism, America First, hiding under what might on the surface look like Christian clothing. It doesn't bring us closer to the God of love. It takes us in the other direction. It puts up a wall between us and God. In other words, it's what in religious terms we would call a sin.

Nationalism is hijacking the Christian faith by distorting and abusing religious imagery in order to seize more and more power. And that should alarm those of us who are actually trying to be Christians who follow Jesus.

By spewing hate and divisiveness, Christian Nationalism actually drives people away from the path of Jesus, from the church. If we've ever wondered why so many people have left the church, one of the big reasons is that we are increasingly identified with movements like Christian Nationalism.

Now, sometimes we hear Christians justifying their support of candidates who clearly don't exhibit Christian values by saying the candidate was chosen or anointed by God. After all, the bible says God chose Israel's kings. It even calls the Persian emperor Cyrus a messiah for allowing the Israelites to return to their homeland, claiming that God was working through Cyrus. And the New Testament letter to the Romans explicitly states we should obey the government because all authority comes from God.⁴

But, I have a problem with all of that. First, I don't dispute that God can work through the most unlikely of people, but the idea that God uses someone to implement one policy understood by some as good and desirable while that same person supports 20 other policies that are harmful to the poor and oppressed is ridiculous.

When God works through someone, God transforms them. They change. One cannot give lip service to God on one hand and go on harming people with the other hand and still claim they are an agent of God.

Second, the people in the bible lived under autocratic governments with kings and emperors. They didn't elect their political leaders. If you didn't obey them, you were putting your life in danger.

But we are lucky enough to live in what is still for now a democracy. Do you really think Jesus would have us vote for leaders whose ideologies are going to hurt people? Or do you think he'd recommend we choose leaders who have the kinds of values that he teaches, kindness and compassion for our neighbor?

Third, even if God chose the kings of the bible, God certainly didn't let them off the hook. They weren't immune to being held accountable for their actions.

In fact there was this entire vocation known as prophet, whose responsibility it was to speak truth to power, to call out misbehaving kings, kings who selfishly went for power and wealth instead of caring for the people and especially the powerless such as the widows and orphans.

God doesn't anoint tyrants and so we cannot use that as an excuse to support them.

What can we do? What should we do? How do we integrate faith and culture?

It seems clear to me that no one religion should be given the power to dictate to government. When that happens, government will become autocratic and theocratic and the religion will be corrupted by wealth and power. We can see this happening over and over throughout history.

⁴ Romans 13:1

It's my belief that the proper role of faith, whatever religion it is based on, should be a prophetic one, one of conscience and not one of rule. The values of our faith, that is compassion and kindness, justice and peace, should guide us, but the trappings of our faith, the rites and rituals, the language and doctrines, have no place in civic discourse.

What we can do is speak out when someone tries to confuse the values of wealth and power with the values of Jesus. We can reclaim the Christian identity by speaking truth to power in defense of the powerless and vulnerable. We can use our prophetic voices like the prophet Ezekiel.

God told Ezekiel that he was being sent to a stubborn and defiant people and whether they listen or not, they will know that a prophet has come among them. We can speak up when someone tries to hijack Jesus' message for their own purposes.

They might not listen. They might not change. Just like those in Jesus' hometown dismissed him. But we cannot remain apathetic and silent. To do so would be to abandon our Christian faith and values.

Another thing we can do is vote for candidates that reflect those values. We're all smart enough to figure out which candidates tell lies, gaslighting their constituents, so they can line their pockets and build their personal power and which candidates are compassionate and loving, concerned about the immigrant, the poor, and the marginalized.

Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount that "No one can serve two masters, for a slave will either hate the one and love the other or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth."⁵

We cannot serve both Christ and so-called Christian Nationalism. And to serve Christ means choosing love over bigotry, peace over political violence, truth over conspiracy theories, supportive community over autocratic theocracy, and power for all over power for the select few, for the self.

When we ask how to integrate nation and faith, we must also ask who is it that we serve? If we wish to serve God, then we must devote ourselves to the values of love.

Amen.