

The Heresy of Christian Nationalism

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A growing nationalist fervor within the Christian community threatens to subvert the cause of Christ and bring great harm to the spiritual health of millions. The historic and biblical witness is that such Christian nationalism is heretical and must therefore be addressed on a pastoral level with great urgency. From the time of the apostles, the temptation to deviate from the truth of the gospel in favor of man-made alternatives has remained ever-present within the Christian community (see Acts 15:1-35; 20:17-31; I Timothy 1:3—7; 6:3-5; Titus 1:10-16; II Peter 2:1-22; I John 4:1-3)¹. Indeed, to look to human power and resources instead of the living God has been a sinful pattern among God’s people throughout redemptive history (see I Samuel 8:4-9; Isaiah 30:1-3; 31:1;36:9; Psalm 20:7).

Now, in our own time, this propensity to ally with secular powers to advance the Church’s mission, is once again on display. This nationalist fervency among Christians is due primarily to the lack of pastoral care and sound teaching in the churches. After all, in the absence of a genuine Christian narrative, the average believer will default to the narrative of the prevailing cultural — which today includes a religious-based nationalism. And when churches are given over to a business and entertainment model staffed by professional hirelings, wolves snatch and scatter the sheep. Therefore, it is essential that churches recover the gospel narrative of an eschatological salvation resulting in an eschatological community which stands apart from the prevailing culture and confesses Jesus Christ alone, as supreme Lord and Savior.

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from, The ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®) copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers, Text Ed. 2016.

The “Holy War” Begins

Since 1979 and the birth of Jerry Falwell’s so-called “Moral Majority,” the propensity of Christians to enlist the power of the state to legislate, regulate, and impose Christian morals upon the populace has grown. The so-called “Christian-Right” has evolved from a fringe movement beginning with figures like aforementioned Jerry Falwell, and others such as Pat Buchanan, Pat Robertson, and Phyllis Schlafly,² and into the mainstream of Republican politics finding growing support within the Christian community. In his address at the 1988 Republican Convention, presidential candidate, Pat Buchanan, introduced a religious tone to the political discourse when he declared the party was engaged in a “Holy War.”

Today, the fear is again growing among Christian leaders that America is at risk of being overrun by a Marxist-based philosophy. While there may be substance to this fear, European history has proven that when the Church seeks safety by allying itself with the state, the end result is the loss of the gospel and the power of the ministry of the Spirit, and the church morphs into a chaplaincy to political power.

Guarding the Treasure of the Gospel

In these perilous times of societal and political upheaval, combined with the threat of heresy within the church, it is wise to remind ourselves of the basis of the Christian identity, purpose, and hope. The gospel we preach is that of God’s *eschatological* salvation effected by the work of Christ, and resulting in an *eschatological* community living out the life of the future in the power of the Spirit, as we await the consummation.³ That the church is an eschatological community means that its values and priorities are not drawn from this present evil age, but from the age to come. This also means that gospel itself originates with the mind of God and not the skill of human thought and philosophy. The Church, therefore, plays the role of a steward, and not that of an innovator employing worldly devices (I Corinthians 4:1-2; II Timothy 1:14). Christian Nationalism represents a sharp departure from the biblical identity, purpose, and mission of the Church.

² Grant Wacker, Duke University Divinity School, “The Christian Right” available on-line.

³ Adapted from Gordon D. Fee, *To What End Exegesis?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), p. 196

As did the apostles, all Christians are to regard themselves therefore as stewards of the gospel of Christ; social and political interests must be understood as temporal, and not the primary concern of the Church. The identity of the body of Christ is that of a people, reconciled by God through Christ; a missionary people carrying forth the ministry of reconciliation as ambassadors of Christ (see II Corinthians 5:18-21). Every Christian home therefore is an embassy of the kingdom of God in which individually and corporately, the members are temples of the presence of the living God, living in the midst of pagan temples and practices. The people of God themselves exist as “a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light” (I Peter 2:9-10).

Once again, when we say the Christian community is an *eschatological* community, we simply mean that the Church has been brought into existence by the saving work of God whereby he has in his Son, brought forward the eschatological (end-time) judgment into history at the cross and resurrection, with the application and empowerment thereof occurring at the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost. Therefore, by the power of the Spirit, the Church now lives out the life of the future new creation in the present, under a new covenant, and under the supreme Lordship of our only Savior, Jesus Christ. The Christian community therefore does *not* draw its identity, purpose, and hope from the social, economic, or political activities of the kingdoms of this age, but from the kingdom of God which is now present and active, by the Spirit, though it is yet to fully realized.

Therefore, Paul instructed Timothy to avoid civil entanglements, saying, “No soldier gets entangled in civilian pursuits, since his aim is to please the one who enlisted him” (II Timothy 2:4). The Christian’s existence is lived out in accord with the values and priorities of the kingdom of God, wherein his citizenship ultimately lies, even while living in this parallel evil age which is quickly passing away. The Christian’s primary purpose is to live as a minister of reconciliation, advancing the kingdom of God through the gospel for which he or she is an ambassador, by the power of the Spirit, and *not* by the power of the state.

There is nothing in the New Testament which commands the Christian to employ the power of the state to advance the priorities and values of the kingdom of God, and it is heresy

to teach otherwise. But since the Constantinian change of 313 A. D., the institutional Church has allied itself with the state, the folly of which is readily apparent in the history of European Christendom. There we discover that to employ the power of the state to force Christian conversion and values upon the populace actually brought spiritual darkness, and it will do so again if this current trend remains unchecked. Let's be clear: the attempt of the Church to create a Christian society by allying with the power of the state is in fact a rejection of the power of the Spirit, and ironically, the result on genuine morals and societal order are as one can only expect when the Spirit of holiness is quenched.

The Philippian Priority

This temptation to place one's loyalty to the state above that of Christ and his kingdom was a challenge also for the early Christians in the Roman colony of Philippi. The citizens there were proud of their status as Roman citizens. It was the first Roman emperor, Caesar Augustus, who had granted Philippi the status of a Roman military colony and thus its inhabitant's status as Roman citizens. At public events, theatre, assemblies, and so on, great affection and honor was therefore given to the emperor. This cult of the emperor reached levels of deification, even calling him, "lord and savior." This, of course, brought the Christian community into direct conflict with the pagan populace of Philippi, and the Roman empire itself.

Gordon D. Fee comments, "Which [the cult of the emperor] is precisely the place where believers in Christ could no longer join as 'citizens of Rome in Philippi.' Their allegiance was to another *Kyrios*, Jesus Christ, before whom every knee would someday bow and every tongue confess, including the citizens of Philippi who are causing their suffering, as well as the emperor himself."⁴ The Christian community held dual citizenship as Roman citizens and the Kingdom of God, but they were very clear as to where their supreme loyalty belonged.

So how did the Philippians respond to this conflict? Did they form a political action committee? Did they hold rallies for Christian candidates for the Roman senate? Did they foster conspiracy theories in hope of discrediting the authority of the governor and emperor? Did they resort to violence to achieve their political goals? No. They instead followed the example of

⁴ Gordon D. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995),

their apostle in suffering for the gospel, and above all, within the community, the example of their only Lord and Savior, and true God, Jesus Christ (Philippians 2:5-11). But they not only submitted to necessary suffering, they also consciously chose to display the superiority of their citizenship in the kingdom of heaven *by the conduct of their daily lives*.

Paul tells these suffering believers to live out the life of the future kingdom in the present, and thus prove themselves “without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world” (Philippians 2:15). His first exhortation is found at 1:27-30.

Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, and not frightened in anything by your opponents. This is a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God. For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake, engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had and now hear that I still have (Philippians 1:27-30).

The Christian response to persecution is not political action or violence, but to live in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ; meaning, to let our conduct reveal the superiority of life under the control of Jesus Christ as supreme Lord and only Savior — as opposed to Caesar. But acting out in fear and violence is a sign one is on the path to destruction, not the kingdom of God. Far better to suffer for Christ and his kingdom than participate in worldly acts of lies and violent insurgency against others. The second exhortation is found at 3:17-4:1.

Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us. For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself. Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved (Philippians 3:17-4:1).

Once again, the response to opposition and threat is to display the superiority of life under Jesus Christ as supreme Lord and only Savior by living out the values and priorities of the future kingdom in the present, by the power of the Spirit, and *not* the power of the state. Christian

conduct is to stand in contrast to, not ape, those who set their minds set on earthly things. We have a Savior, and it is not any politician; we have a Lord, and it is not any man or woman who would command our loyalty and compliance to their agenda. We have no beloved leader—we have but one Leader, One Lord, and One Savior, Jesus Christ, and it is his kingdom to which belong foremost and above all others. The Christian narrative is not that of national pride and patriotism, but of righteousness, peace, and joy, in the Holy Spirit as we live as pilgrims and strangers in the world.

The Contemporary Caesars

And yet, this lesson of church history is all but lost upon today's Christian mind. By adopting the terminology and symbols of Christianity, power-hungry men and women within the political spectrum have gained the support of unwitting Christians. These leaders promise that America can once again be the Christian nation *it never was*, and frightened people buy into the lie. For instance, recently, the conservative autocrat and prime minister of Hungary, Victor Orban, spoke at the Conservative Political Action Committee (CPAC) conference in Texas. His speech was peppered with Christian references and terms. Orban, advocating for a "Christian Democracy," skillfully assured conservatives that the power of the state can be employed to effectively enforce Christian values upon the larger populace — *and the crowd roared with applause and approval*. Many who attend a CPAC event are professing Christians who long to see Donald Trump returned to power (or someone) in order to create such an autocracy in America. Popular Fox News host, Tucker Carlson, even said Orban was someone the West could learn from.⁵

None of this should surprise anyone who witnessed the violent insurgency upon the Capitol on January 6th, 2021. Many of those in the crowd that day chanting, "Hang Mike Pence," stood with those carrying Bibles and/or crosses, and one person, a banner proclaiming "Jesus I trust in You." One woman wore a t-shirt boasting "Jesus is My Lord, and Trump is My President." Such a garment would bewilder a first-century Christian: "Jesus is My Lord, and

⁵ G. Wacker, "The Christian Right."

Nero is my Emperor.” I don’t think so. Still, the use of violence to achieve so-called Christian objectives is as old as European Christendom.

After all, it was after a supposed “vision” in which Constantine was instructed by a heavenly voice to conquer his political and military opponents, using a Christian symbol painted on the shields of his soldiers. It was “the Christian God” said Constantine, that helped him defeat an opposing army and consolidate his grip on Rome. What followed was the formation of a “Holy Roman Empire” with Constantine at its head; a political and military monster with which the Church became allied. Have we learned nothing?

The Christian and Government

Now, as already stated, one cause for the increase in Christian Nationalism is a lack of a teaching regarding the genuine Christian narrative. In fact, that lack of teaching may be the primary cause. Nowhere does the New Testament teach that Christians are to despise government. There isn’t even a command that secular rulers must hold Christian values, or command the use of violence and division to resist those who do not. It ought not be surprising that the New Testament authors wrote during times of great persecution by the Roman Emperors, especially Nero, who used Christians as human torches to light his outside festivities. Even in the midst of such horrific persecution, nothing is said about organizing to oppose secular authorities. Any authority which is opposed is that which stems from false teachers, not against Caesar. Indeed, Peter writing to Christians under persecution commands,

Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, ¹⁴or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. ¹⁵For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. ¹⁶Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. ¹⁷Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor (1 Peter 2:13-17).

And Paul commands,

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. ²Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. ³For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his

approval, ⁴for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. ⁵Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. ⁶For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. ⁷Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed (Romans 13:1-7).

And—

First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, ²for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. ³This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, ⁴who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth (I Timothy 2:1-4).

Christians are to actively intercede on behalf of those in authority, with thanksgiving. This is the active role of the Christian community in government, so that “we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way.” Far from commending the activist obsession against government among Christians, the only biblical reference to those who despise government is in the negative. Speaking of the judgment to come upon the character of false teachers, Peter writes, “especially those who indulge the flesh in the lust of defiling passion and despise authority” (II Peter 2:10); the King James Versions translates, “and despise government.” The popular anti-government mentality among Christians is characteristic of heretics, not those with the mind of Christ. Anti-government language may sell well among politically conservative groups, but it is not biblical, and therefore, does not bring honor to Christ and his kingdom.

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If quoted outside their biblical reference, the above passages would likely be derided as leftist talking points by many within the modern Christian-Right. Let's consider a few others: For instance, the biblical references to caring for the widow and the orphan (see James 1:27), and the rebuke to the rich and those who withhold just wages from workers (see 5:1-6). When was

the last time you heard these passages taught among Christian conservatives? Let's look at another passage, this one regarding the just distribution of resources so as to ensure equality.

For if the readiness is there, it is acceptable according to what a person has, not according to what he does not have. For I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened, but as a matter of fairness your abundance at the present time should supply their need, so that their abundance may supply your need, that there may be fairness. As it is written, "Whoever gathered much had nothing left over, and whoever gathered little had no lack" (II Corinthians 8:12-15).

This last passage would be renounced by many today as a socialist manifesto. It is astonishing how the worldview of the Christian is formed by the American narrative, and not the biblical witness. So also, most American Christians are under the false notion that America was founded by godly Christian men who viewed our freedoms as God-given and therefore worth fighting wars to protect, beginning, of course, with the Revolutionary War.

For instance, one point seldom considered is from where the government derives its authority. Is it from the consent of the governed, or from God? There is simply nothing within the New Testament to support that government is by human design and continues by human consent. Indeed, Thomas Jefferson relied not upon the Bible, but upon the humanistic philosophy of John Locke for his conclusions in the Declaration of Independence. David Percot writes,

Here Jefferson is borrowing heavily from John Locke's humanistic *Two Treatises on Government* and its theory of human governments. According to that humanistic theory, the people themselves are the ultimate authority behind earthly governments. Therefore, if citizens aren't happy with their government, they have the right to overthrow it. In contrast, the Bible teaches that God is the ultimate authority for human governments. We already looked at Romans 13, which says: Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. Therefore, whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God" (Romans 13:1-2). God couldn't have said it any more plainly. Governments do not derive "their just powers from the consent of the governed." They derive their powers from God.⁶

Many Christians today would read Percot's statement as anti-American, but Percot is simply stating biblical truth. And this highlights the issue at hand: What is informing the

⁶ David Percot, *In God We Do Not Trust* (Amberson, PA; Scroll Publishing, 2011), p. 238.

Christian mind today, the American narrative or the biblical narrative? Of course, many will argue that the United States was founded upon biblical principles. But is this accurate? As shocking as Percot's words may be to our patriotic scruples, that does not change the reality.

One point of great irony is this: since government ultimately derives its authority from God, and not the consent of the governed, the most patriotic thing any Christian can do is refrain from direct political involvement and focus time and resources instead on advancing the gospel. Now, let me briefly state six points that expose Christian nationalism as heresy.

I. The substituting of the power of the state for the power of the Spirit

When the risen Christ was about to return the Father, he told his disciples to go to Jerusalem and wait there until they received the promise of the Father, that is, the baptism of the Holy Spirit; for only then would they possess the power to fulfill their mission to be Christ's witnesses "to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:4-8).

But in these perilous times, much of which calls itself the church has in fact repudiated the power of the Spirit in favor of human ways and means (II Timothy 3:5). This includes allying with the power of the state to legislate and enforce Christian values. This is also evident by how churches have adopted a business and entertainment model for evangelism, instead of a prayerful reliance upon the power of the Spirit and the preached Word.

II. Placing American values over those of the kingdom of God.

The church is an eschatological community; meaning those who live out the life of the future kingdom in the present, by the power of the Spirit. This means for God's people the priorities and values of daily life are defined not by the prevailing culture, but by the ethic of the kingdom of God. But as with the power of the Spirit, the influence of the kingdom ethic has also been substituted with American ethics and values. Some go so far as to advocate for a "White Christian Nationalism" with the segregation of races as practiced within Orban's autocratic Christian Democracy in Hungary. By contrast, the gospel of Jesus Christ is a universal outreach to all nations, and the kingdom of God is

that of a diverse people living out “the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:1-3). Unity is that of the Spirit, not race. The dividing line is rightly placed between this present evil age, and the Kingdom of God, not between the left and the right on the political spectrum. Both the left and right are part of the same evil ways of this present age.

III. Waging Spiritual Battle in the Flesh.

The New Testament reveals that a spiritual battle is being waged between the truth and the lie, darkness and light, good and evil — and that this battle is for is for the Christian mind. The apostles are clear that the battleground is not waged “according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ” (II Corinthians 10:3-6). And, elsewhere we read, “Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 6:10-12; see also Acts 20:28-31; I Peter 5:6-11; I John 4:1-6).

Christian nationalism acknowledges a battle, but instead of waging war by the Spirit of truth, with the Word of God, they attempt to use worldly, carnal means to overcome spiritual forces, and therefore play into the hands of the very darkness they seek to overcome. Centuries of religious wars in Europe resolved nothing; rather, those wars and inquisitions only eclipsed the image of Christ and quenched the Spirit. There is a reason that period was called, “The Dark Ages.”

IV. Redefining the basis for fellowship.

Recently a Christian told me his test for fellowship was whether a person believed in socialism. No one who accepted socialism could be a true Christian, said this man. While

socialism has been historically hostile to Christianity, one's acceptance or rejection of that system is not the biblical test for fellowship. I also read recently of a woman who expressed great disappointment that her son differed from her on certain partisan issues, saying he had "gone over to the devil's army, the Democrats and the media." Once again, seeking to establish fellowship based upon partisan leanings, left or right, denies "the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" as the biblical standard for Christian fellowship (see Ephesians 4:1-6).

V. The Loss of Discernment

To idealize any political or religious figure requires the dulling of Spirit-given discernment. Within Christian nationalism, it is common to view a particular leader as beyond criticism or fault. Many Christians display a messianic devotion to a leader despite that leader's public display of non-Christian character. The word of the beloved leader is often then regarded as infallible; such blind loyalty reflects a cult-like passivity. The willingness to commit acts of bigotry and violence by professing Christians in support of that leader reflects a shocking lack of discernment which can only be described as idolatry.

VI. The Loss of Christ-like Character.

What is more, when any particular leader commands blind loyalty within a large population, that population often adopts many of the moral characteristics of that leader. This is the most heinous aspect of the heresy of Christian nationalism, for the Christian is to share in and be conformed into the character image of Jesus Christ, and *not* any political or religious leader. The Christian is a child of God, not Caesar.

Summary and Conclusion

It is the purpose of this brief essay to call attention to and expose a growing heresy within the Christian community: the heresy of Christian Nationalism. There is an urgent need for an immediate pastoral response. We have been reminded that as an eschatological

community, the Church is called to respond to conflict with the world by displaying the superiority of the life of the future age in their daily conduct, in reliance upon the power of the Spirit, and not the power of the state.

It is right and good for all Christians to exercise civic responsibilities as they choose such as voting and support of ballot measures in keeping with their values. And there is great privilege in being an American citizen, for which all Christian should give thanks to God. However, to respond to political and social threat by forming alliances with the power of the state, including that of the sword, in order to force compliance to Christian values and teachings is a denial of the Church's true identity, purpose, and hope and is, therefore, heretical. The mission of the church is to convert hearts and minds by the preaching of the gospel in the power of the Spirit, not to legislate, regulate, and enforce Christian values upon the general populace.

We have identified six points that expose Christian nationalism as heretical: 1) The substitution of the power of the state for the power of the Spirit to meet the Church's mission in the world; 2) Placing American values and ethics over and above those of the Kingdom of God; 3) Waging spiritual warfare by carnal means; 4) Redefining the basis for fellowship by employing tests of partisanship; 5) The loss of discernment in favor of blind loyalty to a leader (s); 6) Adopting the moral character of a political leader(s) versus conforming to Christ-like character, in all holiness, by the Spirit, through the Word of God.

These six points reveal the gravity of the threat posed by continued involvement in political movements that employ Christian terms and symbols, but are in truth, worldly and destructive to the cause of Christ and the health of Christians. It is imperative that pastors and other leaders begin to teach these biblical truths in response to this heresy, and if necessary, exercise biblical discipline upon those who refuse to repent. To guard the treasure of the gospel message and to fulfill the ministry of reconciliation, versus the ministry of the sword, is the call of each Christian individually and corporately, a calling for which all will one day give an account.

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