

“Christian Nationalism: Neither Christian nor Patriotic”

2 Kings 4:42-44 Ephesians 3:14-21; John 6:1-21

Part I of VI in the sermon series “Then and Now”

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From the Pulpit

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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister, First Congregational Church UCC, Columbus, Ohio, July 28, 2024, The Tenth Sunday After Pentecost, dedicated to the birth of Nalani Este Panahan, daughter of Carly Kutschbach Panahan and Ray Panahan, to Twink Starr to honor his 102nd birthday, to the memory of Rev. Dr. Minh Ha Nguyen who served his Lord faithfully and to his family as they grieve him, and always to the Glory of God!

For a moment, I want you to focus on one sentence of all the scripture lessons we have heard today. From John 6:14, following Jesus’ miracle of feeding 5000 people, we just heard: *“When the people saw the sign that he had done, they said, “This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!”* “Indeed,” Jesus is the prophetic miracle working Savior who has come into the world – not the church – but the world in order to save the world.

We live in a time when words like prophet, martyr and saint are used freely and inappropriately by all kinds of people. As we step into this sermon series, “Then and Now,” we all need to remember our truest miracle-working prophet – who has come into the world and comes into the world every day still – Is the Son of God, Jesus Christ. He stands out as the one who pointed billions of people to the fullness of love and justice through two millennia and continues to do so up and into this present moment. All other prophets and miracle workers before and since pale in comparison.

In Jesus, we have all of our reasons for faith, hope and love that we need for daily living – and so much more. In response to his presence in our lives, we need to keep him at the heart and soul of our lived experience of faith. Now let’s see about Christian Nationalism – which is neither Christian nor patriotic.

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*Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock, and our salvation.
Amen.*

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On January 6th, the day of Epiphany 2021, crowds gathered in front of the US Capital to protest the results of the 2020 election. What started as a peaceful protest, led by President Trump and others, became a riot. In the hours that followed, one of the most disturbing things we witnessed on display was Christian imagery on display amidst the Trump/Pence 2020 signs and Confederate flags, QAnon memorabilia, and Viking helmets. People held up crosses, “Jesus Saves” signs and “Jesus 2020” banners.

As protesters crowded onto the Capitol steps, across the street, someone blew a shofar while a woman sang *“Peace in the name of Jesus. The blood of Jesus covering this place.”* In the aftermath of the Capitol attack, many saw a clear connection between the violence and Christian nationalism.

As Tish Harrison Warren wrote on January 7th, 2021, in Christianity Today, a Conservative Christian Publication founded by Billy Graham in 1956, *“The responsibility of yesterday’s violence must be in part laid at the feet of those evangelical leaders who ushered in and applauded Trump’s presidency. It can also sadly be laid at the feet of the white American church more broadly.”*

Christian Nationalism has shown itself in many ways through our 248 year history. So what is Christian Nationalism and how is it different from

Christianity? How is it different from patriotism? How should Christians think about nations, especially for us – about the United States? If nationalism is bad, does that mean we should reject nationality and national loyalty altogether? No.

So let me break this down.

First, Patriotism is good! Patriotism is the love of country. But patriotism is different from nationalism, which is an argument about *how to define* our country. As Christians, we should recognize that patriotism is good because all of God’s creation is good, and patriotism helps us appreciate our particular location in God’s creation. Our affection and loyalty to our specific part of God’s creation helps us do the good work of cultivating and improving the part we happen to live in. As Christians, we can and should love the United States – which also means working to improve our country by holding it up for critique and working for justice and peace when it errs.

But nationalism is different than Patriotism. There are many definitions of nationalism and an active debate about how best to define it. Paul D. Miller is professor of the practice of international affairs at Georgetown University’s School of Foreign Service. He writes in *Christianity Today*, “*I reviewed the standard academic literature on nationalism and found several recurring themes. Most scholars agree that nationalism starts with the belief that humanity is divisible into mutually distinct, internally coherent cultural groups defined by shared traits like language, religion, ethnicity, or culture. From there, scholars say, nationalists believe that these groups should each have their own governments; that governments should promote and protect a nation’s cultural identity; and that sovereign national groups provide meaning and purpose for human beings.*”

Christian nationalism – then – is the belief that our American nation is defined by Christianity, and that the government should take active steps to keep it that way. Popularly, Christian Nationalists assert that America is and must remain a “Christian Nation” – not merely as an observation about American history, but as a prescriptive program for what America must

continue to be in the future. Scholars like Samuel Huntington have made a similar argument: that America is defined by its “Anglo-Protestant” past and that we will lose our identity and our freedom if we do not preserve our cultural inheritance.

Christian Nationalists do not reject the First Amendment and do not advocate for theocracy, but they do believe that Christianity should enjoy a privileged position in the public square. The term “Christian Nationalism,” is relatively new, and its advocates generally do not use it of themselves, but it accurately describes American nationalists who believe American identity is inextricable from Christianity.

So what is the problem with nationalism? Simply this – Humanity is not easily divisible into mutually distinct cultural units. Cultures overlap and their borders are fuzzy. Since cultural units are fuzzy, they make a poor fit as the foundation for political order. Cultural identities are fluid and hard to draw boundaries around, but political boundaries are hard and semipermanent. Attempting to found political legitimacy on cultural likeness means political order will constantly be in danger of being felt as illegitimate by some group or other. Cultural pluralism is essentially inevitable in every nation.

Some say that this is no real problem at all. They say, “let people express themselves and their views.” But, in reality, it is a serious problem. When nationalists go about constructing their nation, they have to define who is in and who is out of this nation. Clearly, anyone who does not claim Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior cannot be part of the nation. In reality, there are always dissidents, minorities, and a variety of religious expressions and experiences in every nation. There are always those who do not or cannot conform to the nationalists’ preferred cultural template. In the absence of moral authority, nationalists can only establish themselves by force.

Everyone who studies this agrees that nationalist governments tend to become authoritarian and oppressive in practice. For example, in past

generations, to the extent that the United States had a quasi-established official religion of Protestantism, it did not respect true religious freedom. Ask Catholics, Muslims and Jews and they will verify their historic abuses during these times. Worse, the United States and many individual states used Christianity as a prop to support slavery and segregation and now they do the same as a basis to attack LGBTQIA and non-Christian people, especially new Americans.

Christian Nationalists want to define America as a Christian nation and they want the government to promote a specific cultural template as the official culture of the country. (Let's be clear – many of their purported beliefs would exclude you as a Baptized Christian from being outside their definition of a real Christian). Some have advocated for an amendment to the Constitution to recognize America's Christian heritage, others to reinstitute prayer in public schools. Some work to enshrine a Christian nationalist interpretation of American history in school curricula, including that America has a special relationship with God or has been "chosen" by God to carry out a special mission on earth. Others advocate for immigration restrictions specifically to prevent a change to American religious and ethnic demographics or a change to American culture. Some want to empower the government to take stronger action to circumscribe immoral behavior.

Some – again, like the scholar Samuel Huntington – have argued that the United States government must defend and enshrine its predominant "Anglo-Protestant" culture to ensure the survival of American democracy. And sometimes Christian Nationalism is most evident not in its political agenda, but in the sort of attitude with which it is held: an unstated presumption that Christians are entitled to a special place in the public square because they are heirs of the true or essential heritage of American culture, that Christians have a presumptive right to define the meaning of the American experiment because they see themselves as America's architects, first citizens, and guardians.

Christian Nationalism tends to treat other Americans as second-class citizens – including women, children, and immigrants. They also tend to treat science, scientists and scientific education with disdain. If fully implemented, it would not respect the full religious liberty of all Americans. Empowering the state through “morals legislation” to regulate conduct always carries the risk of overreaching, setting a bad precedent, and creating governing powers that backfire and could actually be used later against Christians themselves. In case you don’t know this, legislating morality never really works. Go back to the Bible and you will see this foundational truth.

Additionally, Christian nationalism is an ideology held overwhelmingly by white Christian Americans, and it thus tends to exacerbate racial and ethnic cleavages. In recent years, the movement has grown increasingly characterized by fear and by a belief that Christians are victims of persecution in America. Some are beginning to argue that American Christians need to prepare to fight, physically, to preserve America’s identity, an argument that played into the January 6 riot.

Christian Nationalists often project an image of Jesus as an AK-47 wielding, weaponized strong man. Not only that, they also mock and decry anyone who sees Jesus as nonviolent and loving of all people. Jesus looks like Rambo in many pictures I have seen of him. This is frightening – when you put this together with all that I have said already.

I believe all of this makes Christian nationalism dangerous to church and society. Christian nationalism takes the name of Christ for a worldly political agenda, proclaiming that its program is *The* political program for every true believer. This is wrong in principle, no matter what your agenda is, because only the church is authorized to proclaim the name of Jesus and carry his cross and his standard into the world. It is even worse with a political movement that champions some causes that are unjust, which is the case with Christian nationalism and its attendant illiberalism – or anti-democratic policies.

Christian Nationalism calls evil good and good evil. It takes the name of Jesus Christ as a fig leaf to cover its political program, treating the message of Jesus as a tool and a weapon of political propaganda and the church becomes the handmaiden and cheerleader of the state.

In reality, our Christian faith is focused on the person and work of Jesus Christ as defined by the Christian Bible, guided by God, empowered by the Holy Spirit, and strengthened by our creeds, covenants and tradition. It is the gathering of people “from every nation and tribe and people and language,” who worship Jesus (Rev. 7:9), a faith that unites Jews and Greeks, Americans and non-Americans together. Christianity is political, in the sense that its adherents have always understood their faith to challenge, affect, and transcend their worldly loyalties – but there is no single view on what political implications flow from Christian faith other than that we should “fear God, honor the king” (1 Pet. 2:17, NASB), pay our taxes, love our neighbors, and seek justice for all.

In contrast, Christian Nationalism is a political ideology focused on the national identity of the United States. It includes a specific understanding of American history and American government that are, obviously, extrabiblical – an understanding that is contested by most historians, political scientists and theologians. Most importantly, Christian nationalism includes specific policy prescriptions that it claims are biblical but are, at best, extrapolations from biblical principles and, at worst, contradictory to the Bible altogether.

American Christians in the past were exemplary in helping establish our American experiment, and many American Christians worked to end slavery and segregation and other evils. They did so because they believed Christianity required them to work for justice. But they worked to advance Christian principles, not Christian power or Christian culture, which is the key distinction between normal Christian political engagement and Christian nationalism.

Normal Christian political engagement is humble, loving, and sacrificial. It rejects the idea that Christians are entitled to primacy of place in the public square or that Christians have a presumptive right to continue their historical predominance in American culture. Today, Christians should seek to love their neighbors by pursuing justice in the public square, including promoting religious liberty, fostering racial justice, protecting the rule of law, and honoring constitutional processes. That agenda is different from promoting Christian culture, Western heritage, or Anglo-Protestant values. (Drawn from “What is Christian Nationalism?” Dr. Paul D. Miller, Christianity Today, February 3, 2021).

There is no question in my mind, that we as Christians can and should be politically engaged. I also believe we can and should do this without being Christian nationalists because *Christian Nationalism is Neither Christian Nor Patriotic*. Following the Lord of Life, may you find your way to express your faith in action in healthy, productive and patriotic ways. Amen.