

Christian Nationalism: What It Is, and Why Christians Should Oppose It

Especially over the past several years, we've probably all heard the term Christian Nationalism. On the surface, that term might sound innocuous, even something positive. In reality, though, Christian Nationalism is something very dangerous, and something that any Christian, regardless of denomination or tradition, and any American, progressive or conservative, should be aware of and strongly oppose.

From our own tradition, it also is very important to understand that **Presbyterians do not believe in Christian Nationalism. It is completely antithetical to our theology, teachings, and beliefs.** It truly is, as the title of the documentary suggests, a bad expression of faith.

Christian Nationalism is a movement that falls outside of normal liberal/conservative, Republican/Democrat debates. From a public/secular standpoint, it is something that all Americans need to understand and oppose. From a religious standpoint, it's something that all Christians should see as a heretical distortion and co-opting of the Christian faith to achieve secular power.

First, some terminology

What do we mean when we talk about "Nationalism"? On the surface, it sounds like just a synonym for patriotism, but the terms are actually completely different.

Patriotism is a love of country, expressed in healthy ways consistent with the precepts of our national origins. We can express love of country in a number of different ways - we can vote, we can serve on a jury, we can participate in our community and our civic life. We can learn about candidates and educate ourselves. We can pledge our allegiance or choose not to pledge allegiance. We can protest. We are being patriotic when we uphold the equality of, and work for equal protection under the law for, all of our citizens, regardless of any religious, racial/ethnic, biological, or other personal differences. It's patriotic to uphold the rule of law, and to work to protect the natural beauty and health of the broadly diverse environment seen across our nation. These are all ways to be patriotic in the true sense of that term. Actual patriotism is not the exclusive domain of any particular political party or ideological movement.

Nationalism, on the other hand, is an allegiance to country that goes beyond that. Nationalism demands loyalty to the nation to be supreme over all of our other allegiances - including loyalty to Jesus. Nationalism claims the supremacy of the nation over other nations and claims the right to establish or maintain that presumed supremacy by any means necessary, including violence.

Christian Nationalism is a political ideology and a cultural framework that seeks to merge Christian and American identities. It suggests that to be a true American one has to be a Christian – and vice-versa: to be a real Christian one has to be an American, negating any global Christian witness that differs from Christian Nationalist beliefs. Both of those assertions are fallacies. They violate foundational principles of American democracy. It also violates foundational principles of worldwide Christianity.

Christian Nationalism perpetuates the myth that the Constitution has been divinely inspired, with God working through the country's founders who meant to set up a religious state promoting Christianity. To be clear: these ideas are belied by actual history and the text of the Constitution itself.

Throughout our nation's history, Christian Nationalism has appeared in many shapes. It was at the root of, among others:

- The "Doctrine of Discovery" - the legal and religious concept used for centuries to justify Christian colonial conquest. It advanced the idea that European peoples, culture and Christian religion were superior to all

others; therefore, whenever a European nation “discovered” a land new to them, it directly acquired ownership and rights to that land.

- “American Exceptionalism” – the belief that the United States occupies an exclusive, superior, divinely established place among the nations of the world – that we are God’s new “chosen people.”
- “Manifest Destiny” – the outcome of the concept of “American exceptionalism,” the belief that America occupies an exclusive superior place among the countries of the world. Manifest Destiny is the belief that white Christian American settlers were divinely ordained and destined to expand westward across North America, taking possession of all lands and eliminating or “civilizing” all other peoples in their way. and that this belief was both obvious and certain.
- The addition of “under God” to the original Pledge of Allegiance in 1954
- The changing of our nation’s motto from E Pluribus Unum (“from many, one”) to In God We Trust in 1956
- The January 6 insurrection

All of these things were based upon a theological premise that God ordained white supremacy for the establishment of a Christian nation and to utilize the resources of this land, that the bodies and talents of people of color were all for the benefit of white Christian Americans.

Throughout our history, a numerical majority of our population has identified as Christian. However, our Constitution is specifically worded to prohibit endorsement of any particular religion, or any religion at all, and to expressly prohibit any religious requirement or test for any person holding public office. Our founding documents to not establish us as a “Christian nation,” and even shortly after the nation’s founding, in the Treaty of Tripoli of 1797, then-president John Adams – a conservative Federalist – stated “As the government of the United States of America is not in any sense founded on the Christian Religion, as it has in itself no character of enmity against the laws, religious or tranquility of [Muslims]...”

By our Constitution we are a nation of religious neutrality. We are not, and never have been, a “Christian Nation,” established for the sole benefit and advancement of white Christians and any particular form of Christian theological or political expression, in the way claimed by Christian Nationalist.

“Bad Faith” Documentary

Before watching the documentary, we all need to recognize that those of us gathered here are not of one political mind. We are liberals, conservatives, and moderates; Republicans, Democrats, and Independents. And we all hold one another in love and compassion as people of good will and all part of the one community of faith. None of us here, whatever our political identity, are Christian Nationalists. All of us, whatever our political identity, need to address Christian Nationalism within our own personal political location. As we learn more about the Christian Nationalist movement in the United States today, we all need to ask: What should my response to Christian Nationalist as a Democrat? What should it be as a Republican? Those responses may look very different. But most importantly, we all need to see Christian Nationalism as a dangerous, ungodly usurpation of our faith, and we need to ask how we oppose it, first, as a matter of faith, not politics.

As we watch the first half of the documentary, be sure to jot down any notes that you want to discuss next week, or comments that you didn’t understand or had questions about. We’ll start next week’s class with a brief discussion about the first half of the documentary before watching the rest of it.

Sources

<https://www.presbyterianmission.org/story/the-rev-jimmie-hawkins-of-the-pcusa-joins-a-panel-examining-the-trouble-with-christian-nationalism/>

<https://www.presbyterianmission.org/story/september-27-2023/>