

What is Christian Nationalism and Why is It a Problem?

By Drew J. Strait*

There's been a lot of talk about White Christian nationalism since 2016. And for good reason. The rise of Trumpism brought fusions of Christian supremacy and White grievances out of the shadows and into the mainstream. Google searches for the term Christian nationalism spiked after the January 6, 2021 insurrection. Now, some politicians are even owning the descriptor—making t-shirts with the slogan: “Proud Christian Nationalist.”¹ In owning the descriptor, “Christian nationalism” has formally become weaponized in the culture wars over who belongs in the USA and who is a real Christian.

I'm a follower of Jesus who is deeply concerned that White Christian nationalism presents an immediate threat not only to democracy in the United States but also to the church's public witness. I believe we are living in the midst of a theological crisis as much as a political one—the church is desperate for spaces to define Christian nationalism, share corporate wisdom, and to ask “so what” questions—what should we do? How can we mobilize a social movement of Christians against Christian nationalism?

Tweet storms and Facebook threads stuck in algorithmic echo chambers have done little to change minds. How do we realistically go about disrupting White Christian nationalism's influence? My focus today is on these “so what” questions and also the church's witness. Saving democracy—though incredibly important—is outside my wheelhouse as a pastor theologian and New Testament scholar.

* Drew J. Strait is assistant professor of New Testament and Christian origins and director of the Master of Arts program in Theological and Global Anabaptist Studies at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Elkhart, IN.

¹ Fatma Khaled, “Marjorie Taylor Greene Selling Christian Nationalist Shirts Amid Backlash,” *Newsweek*, July, 29, 2022, <https://www.newsweek.com/marjorie-taylor-greene-selling-christian-nationalist-shirts-backlash-goddess-left-attacking-1729267>.

In this first of two essays, I will focus on defining Christian nationalism before turning to naming why it is a problem for the church's public witness. My goal is not to demonize White Christian nationalists who bear the same image of God that I do. Rather, my goal is to tell the truth; this is a moment for the church to both own and show up for.

Breaking silence

The first thing Christians against Christian nationalism can do to challenge Christian nationalism is to break our silence. Silence and deference toward theologies of oppression and political idolatry is not a strategy of protest. As the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. writes, in the face of injustice “There comes a time when silence is betrayal.”² In breaking our silence, we are invited to animate and make visible those ways that White Christian nationalism is incompatible with the life and teachings of Jesus. As Jemar Tisby writes, “The subtler threat of Christian nationalism is a kind of ubiquity that leads to invisibility. For so many White Christians, Christian nationalism isn’t Christian nationalism. Rather, it’s just Christianity. People don’t even see it and that’s the deadliest threat.”³ Here, the church’s public witness is up against a double-edged sword: on the one hand, for Christian nationalists, Christian nationalism just is Christianity. On the other hand, for ex-vangelicals and those who’ve left the church, Christian nationalism has become Christianity.

But to understand Christian nationalism, we have to tell a story that goes beyond the 2016 presidential election and the January 6th Capitol insurrection.⁴ My own exposure to Christian nationalism began long before 2016. It began, in fact, on the morning of 9/11. Like every American, I will

² Quoted in Cornel West, ed., *The Radical King: Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Beacon Press, 2015), 201.

³ Jemar Tisby, “Engaging White Christian Nationalism in Public Spaces,” presentation, White Christian Nationalism in the United States: An Online Mini-Conference, Center for the Study of Religion and Culture, Indianapolis, Aug. 18, 2021, <https://raac.iupui.edu/programs/events/white-christian-nationalism-in-the-united-states-an-online-mini-conference/>.

⁴ For this personal narrative I draw on part of this blog post I wrote for the “Cost of War” initiative with the Mennonite Church USA, “#NeverForget: Christian Nationalism, 9/11 and the War on Terror,” November 9, 2022, <https://www.mennoniteusa.org/menno-snapshots/neverforget-christian-nationalism-9-11-and-the-war-on-terror/>.

STRAIT: What is Christian Nationalism?

never forget waking up to the horrific terror attacks on American soil. To this day I mourn the loss of innocent life and pray for God to comfort the hundreds of families who lost loved ones on that dark day.

As a zealous Evangelical Christian doing all the right things, majoring in theology, pastoring and preaching, and leading youth ministry, our so-called “Christian” nation’s response to 9/11 consumed me. The consensus among my family and friends, and embraced from many local church pulpits, was that violent retribution needed to follow, and that the destruction it brought would be an act of patriotism. I was even told by one prominent New Testament professor that militarized retaliation against Afghanistan and Iraq would open up a way for the gospel to reach the Muslim world. Really? Where, *exactly*, did Jesus’s great commission call us to violent mission?

In solidarity with such sentiment, people waved American flags from bridges in support of the US military and drivers honked in support. Churches offered prayers for soldiers. Donald Rumsfeld, an architect of America’s preemptive invasion of Iraq, placarded Bible verses on top secret classified briefings⁵ while a defense contractor inscribed rifle scopes⁶ with biblical verses like 2 Corinthians 4:6: “For it is the God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” God, apparently, was on America’s side of the scope as it sought to spread coercive light through violence in the Muslim world under the banner of imposed democracy.

Then, on March 20, 2003, America lit the skies with its military might to crush the Hussein regime in Iraq through its “shock and awe” campaign. Even thousands of miles away, the shock and awe felt real as news anchors strapped on military gear to ride in tanks and film the spectacle. As the night wore on, viewers smiled as bombs exploded over Baghdad. I watched from my youth pastor’s house where, to my disbelief, my beloved pastor

⁵ See Frank James, “Donald Rumsfeld’s Bible Verses,” *The Two-Way* (blog), NPR, May 18, 2009, https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2009/05/rumsfelds_bibleverse_briefings.html.

⁶ See Joseph Rhee, Tahman Bradley, and Brian Ross, “U.S. Military Weapons Inscribed with ‘Jesus’ Bible Codes,” *ABC News*, January 15, 2010, <https://abcnews.go.com/Blotter/us-military-weapons-inscribed-secret-jesus-bible-codes/story?id=9575794>.

and closest Christian friends cheered, even yelled, with glee as the Iraqi night sky lit up with balls of fire, sparks, and smoke, signaling the death of strangers beneath the rubble. The celebrated spectacle led to the mutilation of over 200,000 innocent civilians, including entire Chaldean Christian communities.⁷ Christian nationalism—in its soft and hard cultural versions—or what some call “Ambassadors” and “Accommodators”—is deadly.

I come back to this moment often in my research as a New Testament professor. It sparked a life-changing pursuit of understanding Christianity with a more questioning posture toward the nationalist identity that had clouded my previous understanding of scripture and, at times, suppressed my embrace of the teachings of Jesus. It also led me to Anabaptism. As I lived into my new-found Christian identity, I started to observe that there are two dominant expressions of Christianity in the United States. The first is what some call “moral therapeutic deism” and it sounds something like this: “There is a god who created the world, looks down on us from heaven with a smile, wants to bless us, wants us to be good to ourselves and kind to others, is there for us when we are in a jam, and promises us a place in heaven if we are good.”⁸ Sound familiar?

The second dominant expression of God in America I observed is “Christian nationalism” and it sounds like this: “There is a god who created the world, looks down on America with a big smile, has blessed us more than any other nation, thinks our values are his values, wants to expand our influence around the world, wants us to be good to our friends but helps us defeat our enemies, and expects us to love our country as a way of loving God.”⁹ Sound familiar? The thing about moral therapeutic deism and Christian nationalism in the American context is that they have a porous boundary between one another. White Christian nationalism and Hobby-Lobby-trinket-god-superstition go hand in hand.

In addition to telling a story beyond Trumpism, it is important to acknowledge that Christian nationalism is not unique to the United States.

⁷ See Iraq Body Count database, <https://www.iraqbodycount.org/>

⁸ Quote used with permission from Dr. Michael J. Gorman, discontinued blog.

⁹ Quote used with permission from Dr. Michael J. Gorman, discontinued blog.

I'm thinking here of Russian Orthodox priests who supported Vladimir Putin's genocidal invasion of Ukraine.¹⁰ I'm thinking of Evangelical churches in Brazil who supported Jair Bolsonaro's authoritarian tendencies.¹¹ I'm thinking also of Evangelical churches in Ethiopia who are supporting Abiy Ahmed's genocide against Tigray.¹² Christian complicity in nationalist loyalties that lead to violence is a global problem. While Christian nationalism is not unique to the United States, its expression in the United States has some distinctive features rooted in what Andrew Seidel calls "the founding myth."¹³ Understanding a thing or two about the founding myth is crucial for understanding how we got to this moment.

The founding myth

A few weeks ago as I write this, the Pew Research Center came out with new polling data that illustrates just how deep Christian nationalism and Christian exceptionalism is seared into the American conscience. This new data suggests that 45 percent of Americans think the US should be a "Christian nation" and 60 percent of US adults believe America's founders intended the US to be a "Christian nation."¹⁴ These numbers are remarkable.

At the core of these numbers is a myth that goes something like this: The US was founded by White Christian men, it has a special covenant relationship with God, and thereby is specially blessed and serves a special purpose in salvation history. In the more conservative versions of this myth also lies a theological conviction that Christians are entitled and chosen by

¹⁰ See Geraldine Fagan, "How the Russian Orthodox Church is Helping Drive Putin's War in Ukraine," *Time*, April 15, 2022, <https://time.com/6167332/putin-russian-orthodox-church-war-ukraine/>.

¹¹ See Brian Ellsworth and Peter Cardoso, "Bolsonaro Shores up Evangelical Support in Tight Brazil Election," *Reuters*, October 27, 2011, <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/bolsonaro-shores-up-evangelical-support-tight-brazil-election-2022-10-27/>.

¹² See Andrew DeCort, "Christian Nationalism is Tearing Ethiopia Apart," *Foreign Policy*, June 18, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/06/18/ethiopia-pentecostal-evangelical-abiy-ahmed-christian-nationalism/>.

¹³ Andrew L. Seidel, *The Founding Myth: Why Christian Nationalism is Un-American* (New York: Sterling, 2021).

¹⁴ See Gregory A. Smith, Michael Rotolo, and Patricia Tevington, "Views of the U.S. and a 'Christian Nation' and opinions about 'Christian Nationalism,'" Pew Research Center, October 27, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/10/27/views-of-the-u-s-as-a-christian-nation-and-opinions-about-christian-nationalism/>.

God to rule—to hold dominion over society (Genesis 1:28). Theologians call this dominionism.

The allure of dominionism expanded in the 1970s through Evangelical leaders like Francis Schaefer and Bill Bright, who developed an idea called “seven mountain dominionism.” The basic idea is that Christians are called to influence seven spheres of society: family, religion, education, media, entertainment, business, and government.¹⁵ Oddly, the theory is based on Revelation 17:9, a passage that has nothing to do with these spheres of influence and everything to do with John’s critique of Rome’s idolatry, a city surrounded by “seven” mountains.¹⁶ Still, the ongoing impact of this ideology is felt in many circles of American Evangelicalism, including the disgraced US general Michael Flynn’s “Reawaken America” rallies, where dominionist leaders are calling for an “army for God,” performing baptisms, selling trinkets, and telling a dangerous message that so-called American greatness is in decline and it is up to Christians to take the country back for God.¹⁷

As many have shown, the desire to take America back for God has little to do with piety and biblical values. Rather, as Michelle Goldberg wrote ahead of her time in 2006, “the ultimate goal of Christian nationalist leaders isn’t fairness. It’s dominion. The movement is built on a theology that asserts the Christian right to rule. That doesn’t mean that nonbelievers will be forced to convert. They’ll just have to learn their place.”¹⁸ When the “right to rule” is encroached on by outsiders—for example, non-Christians, persons of color, and LGBTQ+ persons, and so on—Christian nationalists can turn

¹⁵ For a helpful overview of dominionism, see Keri Ladner, “The Quiet Rise of Christian Dominionism,” *Christian Century*, September 22, 2022, <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/features/quiet-rise-christian-dominionism>.

¹⁶ The passage reads, “This calls for a mind that has wisdom: the seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman is seated; also, they are seven kings” (Rev 17:9). For comment on this passage, see Michael J. Gorman, *Reading Revelation Responsibility: Uncivil Worship and Witness Following the Lamb in to the New Creation* (Eugene: Cascade, 2011), 128.

¹⁷ See Lisa Hagen, “The ReAwaken Tour Unites Conservative Christians and Conspiracy Theorists,” *Morning Edition*, NPR, November 3, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/11/02/1133477897/reawaken-america-brings-together-some-of-the-u-s-most-prolific-conspiracy-theori>.

¹⁸ Michelle Goldberg, *Kingdom Coming: The Rise of Christian Nationalism* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006), 7.

to radical means to “save America” or “make American great again.” This point is not hard to illustrate.

Here, the congressional testimony by the Capitol police officer Daniel Hodges who was crushed in a door by January 6th insurrectionists is telling. Hodges testified that,

The sea of people was punctuated by people with flags. . . . [I]t was clear the terrorists perceived themselves to be Christians. I saw the Christian flag directly to my front. Another read “Jesus is my Savior, Trump is my president.” Another, Jesus is King. One flag read “Don’t Give up the Ship.” Another had crossed rifles beneath a skull emblazoned with the American flag. To my perpetual confusion I saw the thin blue line flag, a symbol of support for law enforcement, more than once being carried by the terrorists as they ignored our commands and continued to assault us.¹⁹

Hodges’s description of Christian symbols alongside violent insurrectionists offers a stunning window into how Christian nationalists’ “right to rule” can simultaneously mean “right to rule” through violent coercion.

Aside from its significant theological problems, the founding myth and the dominionist theologies that underlie its popularity have significant historical problems. These historical problems are not hard to illustrate. Thomas Jefferson, for example, was a founding father, slave owner, and deist who used razor and glue to compose his own version of the gospels, where he excised most supernatural events, including miracle stories. Put simply, Thomas Jefferson was not an orthodox Christian, let alone an Evangelical one.²⁰

In 1983, the preeminent Evangelical historians Mark Noll, Nathan O. Hatch and George M. Marsden set out to “search” for Christian America in a co-authored book. Their conclusion offers an even-handed and stunning rebuke of those who consider America a “Christian nation.” The authors

¹⁹ For full testimony, see Oriana Gonzalas, “D.C. Officer: ‘It was Clear the Terrorists Perceived Themselves to be Christians,’” *Axios*, July 27, 2021, <https://www.axios.com/2021/07/27/capitol-riot-terrorists-christians-police-attack>.

²⁰ For an overview of Jefferson’s religious beliefs, see John Fea, *Was America Founded As a Christian Nation: A Historical Introduction* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016), 203-215.

write that “a careful study of the facts of history shows that early America does not deserve to be considered uniquely, distinctly or even predominately Christian, if we mean by the word ‘Christian’ a state of society reflecting the ideals represented in Scripture.”²¹ They go on to write that the very “idea of a ‘Christian nation’ is a very ambiguous concept which is usually harmful to effective Christian action in society,” concluding that, “America is not a Christian country, nor will it ever be one.”²²

Beyond these historical problems lie theological problems that can create more harm than good in society. After all, according to the New Testament, there is no such thing as a “Christian nation.” The only Christian nation in the world is what the New Testament calls the *ekklesia* (or, “church”) and it is multi-cultural, borderless, weaponless, and the primary context for bearing witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ. To be clear, I’m not suggesting that Christians are called to passivity toward state power.²³ Rather, I’m suggesting that animating the “founding myth” can help us challenge misplaced loyalties that lead to political idolatry.

Toward a definition of Christian nationalism

In addition to breaking our silence, the most important thing Christians against Christian nationalism can do is define Christian nationalism. It’s impossible to resist something unless you can name the objects of your resistance. Or, as Kimberlé Crenshaw argues, “where there’s no name for a problem, you can’t see a problem, and when you can’t see a problem, you pretty much can’t solve it.”²⁴ The problem we are addressing is Christian nationalism.

Thankfully we are not lacking in studies that animate and define what Christian nationalism is for the moment in which we are living. Since 2020, our understanding of Christian nationalism has come into much sharper

²¹ Mark A. Noll, Nathan O. Hatch, and George M. Marsden, *The Search for Christian America* (Westchester: Crossway Books, 1983), 17.

²² Noel, Hatch, and Marsden, 17, 102.

²³ For a helpful Christian approach to state power, see Miroslav Volf, *A Public Faith: How Followers of Christ Should Serve the Common Good* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2011).

²⁴ Quoted in Kimberlé Crenshaw, “The Urgency of Intersectionality,” TED Talk, TEDWomen, 2016, https://www.ted.com/talks/kimberle_crenshaw_the_urgency_of_intersectionality?language=en.

focus, especially through the pioneering work of sociologists Andrew Whitehead and Samuel Perry's 2020 book, titled, *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States*.²⁵ *Taking America Back for God* represents the first data driven, scientific analysis of what Christian nationalism is based on data from the Baylor Religion Survey, in-depth interviews, and participant observation at large events.

Whitehead and Perry define Christian nationalism as “a cultural framework—a collection of myths, traditions, symbols, narratives, and value systems—that idealizes and advocates a fusion of Christianity with American civic life.”²⁶ Key to their definition is the idea that “the ‘Christianity’ of Christian nationalism represents something more than religion. As we will show, it includes assumptions of nativism, White supremacy, patriarchy, and heteronormativity, along with divine sanction for authoritarian control and militarism. It is as ethnic and political as it is religious.”²⁷ The last sentence in Whitehead and Perry's definition is key: one's ethno-racial identity becomes interrelated and overlapping with one's partisan political loyalties and religious identity.

Whitehead and Perry argue that there are four postures toward Christian nationalism among Americans: Rejecters, Resisters, Accommodators, and Ambassadors. This spectrum, now used widely among journalists and scholars, provides an incredibly helpful reminder that Christian nationalists are not a homogenous group. It's a messy world we live in after all. According to Whitehead and Perry, Rejecters make up 21.5 percent of Americans and comprise those individuals who are most educated and resistant to implementing Christian values in American public life. One-third of Rejecters associate with a Christian religious tradition and tend to be wealthier and to populate urban centers, the Northeast, or West regions of the country.

²⁵ Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry, *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020). For a fuller review of Whitehead and Perry's work that I wrote for pastors and leaders, see: Drew Strait, “Let's Talk about ‘Christian Nationalism,’” *Jesus Creed* (blog), August 26, 2020, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/scot-mcknight/2020/august/lets-talk-about-christian-nationalism.html>.

²⁶ Whitehead and Perry, 10.

²⁷ Whitehead and Perry, 10

BRETHREN IN CHRIST
HISTORY & LIFE

Resisters make up 26.6 percent of Americans and share key demographics with Rejecters, with the exception of being slightly less educated. Resisters are more religious than Rejecters (80 percent believe in a higher power, compared to only 40 percent of Rejecters). While Resisters are suspicious of the declaration that America is a Christian nation, they might be comfortable with the presence of religious symbols in public places. It is notable that Resisters and Rejecters make up almost half of the U.S. population as a whole.

Accommodators make up 32.1 percent of America and lean toward Christian nationalism while holding some ambivalence toward it. Accommodators are older, include more women than Rejecters/Resisters, are more religious (a third are evangelical Protestant and a third identify as Catholic), and, like Resisters, tend to be political moderates (47 percent identify as such).

Ambassadors make up 19.8 percent of America and are the least educated and oldest of the four groups (average age is 54, whereas the average age of Rejecters is 43). For Ambassadors, the founding fathers were Christians, and America's prosperity hinges on obedience to God's law in the Bible (but with strong preference for Old Testament texts). Notably, only 16 percent of Ambassadors reside in cities—a reminder that to challenge Ambassadors we need to create more relational ties between urban and rural, educated and uneducated, etc.

Key predictors of Ambassadors include identification with political conservatism, belief in the Bible as the literal word of God, belief that America is on the brink of moral decay, belief that God requires the faithful to wage war for good, and belief in the rapture (even though the word “rapture” does not occur in the Bible). While Ambassadors comprise the smallest group, they have an outsized amount of power due to gerrymandering and the ways congressional representation works in the United States (for example, Wyoming has two senators with a population of about 578,803 people; California, on the other hand, has two senators with a population of 39.24 million people).

Some major takeaways from Whitehead and Perry's scholarship are first and foremost definitional clarity about the mechanics of Christian nationalism. Additionally, they show that Christian nationalism is not strictly about “religious revival” but political power, boundaries, and

order. They also show *through data* that it gravitates toward soft and hard versions of nativism (anti-immigrant), xenophobia (fear of strangers), White supremacy (and in some cases participation in the White power movement), homophobia, militarism, patriarchy, and authoritarianism.

Whitehead and Perry have offered us a longer and more sophisticated definition of Christian nationalism in sociological perspective.²⁸ But how can we define it in theological perspective? In short, I think Christian nationalism is best summarized as *a movement where theological imagination is co-opted by state power*. To my short definition we can add three longer points:

1. First, Christian nationalism is a worldview where one's ethno-racial identity becomes a more powerful controlling narrative than one's baptismal identity "in Christ." In other words, being White and American becomes a more important identity marker than our corporate and global being in Christ (Acts 2:1-13; Galatians 3:26-29; Ephesians 2:11-22).
2. Second, Christian nationalism is a worldview that sees the militarized kingdoms of this world (rather than the unarmed, multicultural church) as the primary context for bearing witness to Jesus and the kingdom of God. In other words, allegiances to state and military power and partisan loyalties become the primary vehicle and context for Christian mission and witness (see especially Mark 1:15; Luke 4:5-8; Revelation 18).
3. Christian nationalism is a perversion of Jesus's way of peace that endorses state violence, police brutality, and personal armament as expressions of faithful discipleship. In other words, it turns a blind eye to Jesus's example and teaching on nonviolent resistance, neighborly love, and peacemaking, along with the unanimous witness of the New Testament that the way of Jesus is a way of peace (see especially Matthew 5:38-48 and Romans 12:13-21; 13:8-10).

²⁸ Paul Miller has also offered helpful definitions: "Christian nationalism is the belief that the American nation is defined by Christianity, and that the government should take active steps to keep it that way." See: Paul D. Miller, "What is Christian Nationalism?" *Christianity Today*, February 3, 2021, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2021/february-web-only/what-is-christian-nationalism.html>. For his book, see Paul D. Miller, *The Religion of American Greatness: What's Wrong with Christian Nationalism* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2022).

Together, these are all symptoms of a diseased theological imagination, infected and co-opted by state power. The worship of state power has a compounding effect—it is a kind of contagion or pandemic that multiplies exponentially among its worshipers, resulting in the production of what the apostle Paul calls “Sin” in society that becomes embedded not only in interpersonal relationships, but the systems and structures upon which we do life together.

Why “White” Christian nationalism?

Since Whitehead and Perry wrote *Taking America Back for God*, scholars and pundits of all stripes have debated about whether we should talk about Christian nationalism or “White” Christian nationalism. Admittedly, this is a confusing nuance since there are fringe “blacks for Trump” groups, along with Latinos who voted for Trump because of shared Christian nationalist values.

Debates around adding the descriptor “White” have, in my opinion, been laid to rest by a recent book by Philip Gorski and Samuel Perry, titled, *The Flag and the Cross: White Christian Nationalism and the Threat to American Democracy*. The authors argue that Whiteness is the controlling narrative of Christian nationalism because data on key issues behaves differently among Whites than with persons of color. The authors argue that “the subtext of Whiteness in the language of ‘Christian nation’ and ‘Christian values’ becomes obvious when we see how differently our Christian nationalism measures work for Whites than for Black Americans. For Black Americans, adherence to Christian nationalism has little if any correlation with their views about racial discrimination, American religious history, COVID-19 issues, or views on the economy.”²⁹ Gorski and Perry’s findings are important as we aim to get more definitional clarity on the objects of our resistance. But what do we even mean when we use the word “Whiteness?”

The best definition of Whiteness that I’m aware of comes from theologian Willie James Jennings, who argues that “Whiteness is a way of imagining oneself as the central facilitating reality of the world, and Whiteness is

²⁹ Philip S. Gorski and Samuel L. Perry, *The Flag and the Cross: White Christian Nationalism and the Threat to American Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 44.

having the power to sustain that imagination.”³⁰ What’s disturbing is that when White privilege and power are encroached upon by outsiders, violence becomes a viable option for White Christian nationalists to maintain power as the “central facilitating reality of the world.” Gorski and Perry, in fact, find that “The more that White Americans seek to institutionalize ‘Christian values’ or the nation’s Christian identity, the more strongly they support gun-toting good guys taking on (real or imagined) gun-toting bad guys, the more frequent use of the death penalty, any-means-necessary policing, and even torture as an interrogation technique.”³¹ Herein lies one of White Christian nationalism’s most dizzying perversions of early Christianity: It has transformed the nonviolent, enemy and neighbor loving, crucified Jesus into a violent White Rambo god who pacifies human difference (sometimes even violently!) to maintain White power and privilege over marginalized persons.

The fear of losing power that underlies Whiteness is not difficult to stoke. One conspiracy theory that has stoked the fires of White nationalism across Europe and the United States is called “replacement theory.”³² Replacement theory finds its roots in twentieth century French nationalism but found its modern expression in French author Renaud Camus’s 2011 book, titled, *Le Grand Remplacement* (or *The Great Replacement*). As Muslim refugees fled to Europe from Syria’s genocidal war, Camus’s book stoked the fear that non-Whites are replacing Whites, a fear compounded by the idea that non-White birth rates are in decline.

Camus’s ideas quickly jumped the pond to North American pundits, who popularized the idea on major media outlets like Fox News. Among White power extremists in the United States, talk of “White genocide” took hold in soft and hard versions. Notably, White supremacists in the United States had already sacralized the concept in what they call the fourteen

³⁰ Willie James Jennings, “To be a Christian Intellectual,” *Yale Divinity School*, October 30, 2015, <https://divinity.yale.edu/news/willie-jennings-be-christian-intellectual>

³¹ Gorski and Perry, *The Flag and the Cross*, 96.

³² Throughout this paragraph I rely on this primer on replacement theory: “The Greater Replacement: An Explainer.” ADL [Anti-Defamation League], April 19, 2021, <https://www.adl.org/resources/backgrounders/the-great-replacement-an-explainer>

words: “We must secure the existence of our people and a future for White children.” Not surprisingly, White nationalists in 2017 at the “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville chanted: “The Jews will not replace us!”³³

What is disturbing about replacement theory is that one doesn’t have to be an Ambassador of Christian nationalism or a member of the White power movement to be co-opted by its ideas. I can think of professing Christians in my own network who’ve bought into the fear of being replaced by immigrants. This is one reason that Donald Trump was so effective at stoking his base. Take, for example, this Tweet from October 29, 2018: “Many Gang Members and some very bad people are mixed into the Caravan heading to our Southern Border. Please go back, you will not be admitted into the United States unless you go through the legal process. This is an invasion of our Country and our Military is waiting for you!”³⁴ For those consuming a daily media diet of soft and hard versions of replacement theory, the message of caravans stoked fears of replacement—indeed, only a tough, “law and order” strong man can preserve and protect Whiteness.

The influence of Whiteness in our body politic is reflected in recent data that suggests that economic anxiety (or pocket book voting) had little to do with supporting Trump in the 2016 election. Rather, racial identity and status threat drove Trump supporters. As Diana Mutz writes in an article from the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, “White Americans’ declining numerical dominance in the United States together with the rising status of African Americans and American insecurity about whether the United States is still the dominant global economic superpower combined to prompt a classic defensive reaction among members of dominant groups.”³⁵ Replacement theory—not economic anxiety—propelled Trump to power.

³³ On the fourteen words and other hate symbols at the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, see: Washington Post staff, “Deconstructing the Symbols and Slogans Spotted in Charlottesville,” *Washington Post*, August 18, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2017/local/charlottesville-videos/>.

³⁴ See Matthew Choi, “Trump: Military Will Defend Border From Caravan ‘Invasion,’” *Politico*, October 29, 2018, <https://www.politico.com/story/2018/10/29/trump-military-caravan-migrants-945683>.

³⁵ See Diana Mutz, “Status Threat, Not Economic Harship, Explain the 2016 Presidential Vote,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 115, no. 19 (April 23, 2018), <https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.1718155115>.

In a country where there are more guns than people, the relationship between Whiteness, violence, and White Christian nationalism presents an existential threat to public safety in the United States.³⁶ It also presents an existential threat to the church's integrity, public witness, and loyalty to the life and teachings of Jesus. The first step in challenging Whiteness is to break our silence and publicly name and define Christian nationalism as White Christian nationalism.

Why is White Christian nationalism political idolatry?

The most important takeaway from recent scholarship on White Christian nationalism is that it has little to do with following the Jesus of the four gospels and everything to do with preserving cultural privilege and political power in society, using Jesus and Christianity as vague mascots for anger and, at times, violence.³⁷

This anger and violence are not hard to illustrate. After all, we have photos, videos and audio of hundreds of January 6th insurrectionists parading Christian imagery through the streets of Washington, DC, praying to and worshiping Jesus as they violently laid siege to the center of American democracy.³⁸ Two specific images from the insurrection still distress me. The first is of an insurrectionist holding a large poster of White Jesus with a "Make America Great Again" (MAGA) hat on.³⁹ The other is of multiple videos of insurrectionists singing praise songs and praying their way into the capitol adorned with MAGA gear and American flags.⁴⁰

When one studies these images and videos, it becomes clear that many of these insurrectionists were having a religious and spiritual experience on January 6th—perhaps even a "mountain top experience." A good example

³⁶ Rachel Kleinfeld, "The Rise in Political Violence in the United States and Damage to Our Democracy," Carnegie Endowment, March 31, 2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/03/31/rise-in-political-violence-in-united-states-and-damage-to-our-democracy-pub-87584>.

³⁷ See especially White and Perry, *Taking America Back for God*, 55-88.

³⁸ Images and videos from the January 6th insurrection have been archived by the University of Alabama's Department of Religious Studies and the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History on the website, "Uncivil Religion," updated December 31, 2021, <https://uncivilreligion.org/home/index>.

³⁹ <https://uncivilreligion.org/home/media/maga-jesus>.

⁴⁰ For multiple examples caught on video, see: <https://uncivilreligion.org/home/rituals>.

of this is the right-wing Texas “Three Percenters” recruiter Guy Reffit. Reffit is charged with leading the pro-Trump mob into Congress. After the insurrection, Reffit texted a friend: “I got hit with rubber bullets and pepper sprayed. I was the first person to light the fire on the Capital steps. . . . WE TOOK THE CAPITAL” (sic).⁴¹

On return to Texas, Reffit bragged to his three children and showed them videos of his role in the insurrection. Reffit’s only son, a nineteen-year-old, was not amused so a few days later Guy Reffit warned his children that “traitors get shot.” Despite the violent warning, Reffit’s son met with the FBI to turn in his father. While taking the stand, Reffit’s son brought his father to tears as he testified against him in support of the prosecutors’ charge of five felony counts. Strikingly, Reffit’s son acknowledged that he felt “gross” and “very uncomfortable” but that their political differences became polarized after 2016 under Trump and that “it would be a good thing to talk about for a lot of families that are going through this. . . . There were hundreds of people on January 6, they all had families. Everyone is attached to them.”

This story is gut-wrenching. Misinformation and conspiracy theories, in this case the idea of a stolen election, have torn apart and traumatized a whole family. MAGA Jesus and his insurrectionists’ misplaced loyalties and desires for power reflect the ways our idols become “creatures of the human imagination that take control of people and their lives.”⁴² Disorienting Christian nationalists’ desire for power—abetted by MAGA Jesus—demands new optics and strategies for retelling the story of Jesus by using the Bible and the unarmed, multicultural church as sites for contestation and disorientation. But who is this MAGA Jesus that insurrectionists pray to and worship? And what’s wrong with worshipping him?

Believe it or not, I think that the Jesus of Christian nationalism—what I’m calling MAGA Jesus—is in the Bible. MAGA Jesus is what ancient Jews called in Greek an *eidōlon*—or, an “idol.” In the ancient world, an *eidōlon*

⁴¹ On the story of Guy Reffit, I rely on: Sam Gabral and Tara McKelvey, “Guy Reffit: Capitol Rioter Turned in by Son Gets 87 Months in Prison,” *BBC News*, December 31, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-62382492>

⁴² Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, *Idolatry*, trans. Naomi Goldblum (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 6.

meant a “shadow,” a “phantom,” or something that “appears” or merely “seems to be.” In carefully choosing this polemical Greek word, the people of God resisted the worship of objects of power, both real and imagined, that could distort one’s knowledge of God. In ancient Judaism, idolatry was not something that happened in your heart. Rather, it was something that happened in your head. Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit define idolatry as an “improper conception of God in the mind of the worshiper, thereby internalizing sin.”⁴³ In this sense, idolatry was a form of “error.”⁴⁴ Idols, in Jewish thought, were erroneous objects of worship that people pray to in exchange for benefits like power, protection, rain, happiness, healing, and so forth.

The problem, then, is not whether or not Christian nationalists are having a genuine religious experience—they are! The problem is that the object of their worship is a shadow cast by White grievance toward a perceived loss of cultural power and privilege. Put simply, MAGA Jesus is a form of what ancient Jews called *avodah zarah*, or “strange worship.” As Willie Jennings argues, “This is why nationalism for us moderns is the first idolatry because it places another god before God. It places a god-bound-to-our-nation over the God of all nations. . . . The horror of the god-bound-to-us nationalism is not that it wants our respect; it wants our desire”⁴⁵—desire for power, order, boundaries, walls, Whiteness, wealth, and “law and order.” The object of these desires, however, is a form of error—a competing loyalty that distorts our knowledge of God and ultimately perverts the gospel of Jesus Christ.

White Christian nationalism, therefore, is a form of political idolatry because it is a form of strange worship that exchanges the worship of Jesus for the worship of political power.

Why is Christian nationalism a problem?

I will now shift gears to address the question posed in the title of this talk: Why is Christian nationalism a problem? One could belabor this question with a list of problems it presents society, including the many

⁴³ Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, 2.

⁴⁴ Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, 2.

⁴⁵ Willie James Jennings, *Acts: A Theological Commentary on the Bible* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 22-23.

ways it threatens democracy. But I don't want to muddle the main point I want to make as a pastor theologian. *White Christian nationalism is a problem because it presents the greatest threat to the church's public witness to salvation and peace in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.*

White Christian nationalism is a problem because it distorts the life and teachings of Jesus. It exchanges the worship of a crucified king for "power worship" in the guise of "law and order." It exchanges loyalty to the kingdom of God for allegiance to the kingdoms of this world. It exchanges Jesus's model of boundary crossing and neighborly love for fortification, segregation and walls. It exchanges Jesus's way of peacemaking for coercion through weaponry. It exchanges love of God and neighbor for love of self and racialized hierarchies. It exchanges the gospel's embrace of human difference for the anti-gospel fear of strangers.

I do not want to end this essay on a note of despair. As followers of the crucified, but raised Jesus, Christians against White Christian nationalism are not without hope. It's okay to be angry at injustice and political idolatry. The word "nice" does not occur anywhere in the Bible. As Melissa Florer-Bixler writes, "When we welcome this anger's presence, rather than tamping down its energy, we find the power to create a community of resistance, and that makes forgiveness a possibility."⁴⁶ One strategy for harnessing our anger to create a community of faithful resistance can be found in the biblical tradition of lament. As Mark Charles and Soong-Chan Rah write, "Lament serves as a crucial expression of worship because it is truth telling before God."⁴⁷ This is a moment for Christians against White Christian nationalism to show up and tell the truth.

What is lament? Lament is a biblical tradition, what some call "complaint prayers," that offers a dynamic liturgical tool for addressing harm that has been done. The absence of lament in much of contemporary Christian worship is a noteworthy reminder that discipleship is too often seen as a passive relationship of "coercive obedience" with God.⁴⁸ Through lament,

⁴⁶ Melissa Florer-Bixler, *How to Have an Enemy: Righteous Anger & the Work of Peace* (Harrisonburg, Herald Press: 2021), 63.

⁴⁷ Mark Charles and Soong-Chan Rah, *Unsettling Truths: The Ongoing, Dehumanizing Legacy of the Doctrine of Discovery* (Grand Rapids: IVP Books, 2019), 9.

⁴⁸ Walter Brueggemann, "The Costly Loss of Lament," in *The Psalms: The Life of Faith*, ed. Patrick D. Miller (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 104.

God offers the people of God an ancient way to talk back, to complain to God about injustice, abuses of power, idolatry, exploitation and even the feeling of God's absence. Lament is a language that implores God to act now.

It is not an accident that the majority of Old Testament psalms are laments and Israel became Israel through lament: "The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God. God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them" (Exod 2:23-25). Lament gives us permission to be angry at injustice and oppression; it gives us permission to groan and protest for God to act. As Rebekah Eklund writes, lament is a prayer of protest that imagines "a world now in which there might be less tears."⁴⁹

The psalmists give us permission to not only complain, but to *complain*: "Rouse yourself! Why do you sleep, O Lord? Awaken, do not cast us off forever!" (Psalm 44:23). Indeed, it is hard not to feel like God fell asleep on the job when Capitol insurrectionists sang worship songs, read Scripture, carried crosses, prayed to Jesus, and held placards of White Jesus with a MAGA hat on as they assaulted their way into the Capitol building on January 6, 2021. *Rouse yourself, oh God! Why do you let your holy name be used by White Christian nationalists to publicly humiliate your faithful people?*

The logic of prayers of lament is perhaps best-captured by Walter Brueggemann, who has done the most to reclaim lament as a part of the church's liturgy. Brueggemann writes that lament "makes the shrill insistence that:

1. Things are not right in the present arrangement.
2. They need not stay this way and can be changed.
3. The speaker will not accept them in this way, for the present arrangement is intolerable.
4. It is God's obligation to change things."⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Rebekah Eklund, *Practicing Lament* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2021), 70.

⁵⁰ Brueggemann, 105.

The posture of prayers of complaint centers the need for justice and, at times, human actors' incapacity to affect justice without God's help. In this sense, the proper posture for Christians against Christian nationalism to embody is one of lament and truth telling: of acknowledging that things are not right, that the forms of Christian expression dominating Christian nationalism are not acceptable, that things can be changed, and it is God's obligation to act. What's striking about prayers of lament is that they can be addressed to God about God or addressed to God *about neighbor*.⁵¹ Lament gives us permission to complain about God and about our neighbors to God and to ask God to show up.

It is in the spirit and posture of lament that I invite readers to move with me from "objects of resistance" to "strategies of resistance" in the second essay, titled, "A Pastoral Approach to Resisting Christian Nationalism's Influence in the Local Congregation."

⁵¹ Brueggemann, 105.