

A Pastoral Approach to Resisting Christian Nationalism's Influence in the Local Congregation

By Drew J. Strait*

The flurry of interest in White Christian nationalism by historians, sociologists, and scholars of religion in the past few years has produced crucial insights into its innerworkings. This work offers a goldmine of insight and analysis for Christians against Christian nationalism as we develop a pastoral approach to resisting Christian nationalism's influence in the local congregation. The work of deconstruction is well under way. However, the work of reconstruction is only beginning.

My vocation is to train pastors and leaders to lead and nurture Christ's church. As I've sought to address White Christian nationalism in congregations and classrooms, the question I receive most often is this: "How can we effectively challenge the growing influence of White Christian nationalism? We understand what it is, but what can we do about it?" This essay is an attempt to offer some answers to this question.¹

I won't pretend to have my finger on the pulse of a comprehensive solution for pastors, leaders, and congregants. At the end of the day we need an interdisciplinary, ecumenical, multi-generational, multi-actor peacebuilding movement in order to interrupt White Christian nationalism's influence. No singular celebrity pastor, scholar, or theologian can "fix" the problem before us. Either we are in this together or we are not in it at all.

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¹ I have also addressed these questions in webinar form: Drew Strait, "Political Idolatry: Countering Christian Nationalism," (webinar, Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Elkhart, IN, June 15, 2022), <https://www.ambs.edu/what-is-christian-nationalism/>.

In what follows I will offer some pastoral approaches to challenging White Christian nationalism.

Why nonviolent civil resistance works

Throughout this essay, I will use a word with all sorts of cultural baggage. That word is "resistance." When I use this word I want to be clear that I'm not talking about "violent resistance." Rather, I am talking about nonviolent civil resistance as a vital component of what it means to participate in God's mission of reconciliation and the church's disruption of idolatry, oppression, and sin in our world.

As followers of Christ, nonviolent resistance is important because it is the way of Jesus and the way of the earliest Christians. It is also important because in recent years we have learned more about the incredible success of nonviolent civil resistance movements. For example, political scientists Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan recently collected data on 323 violent and nonviolent resistance campaigns between 1900 and 2006 that had at least one thousand or more participants.² What they found is stunning.

They found that nonviolent movements were on average about twice as successful as violent ones (a 53 percent success rate compared to 25 percent). They also observe that the long-term consequences of nonviolent movements tended to point toward democracy, while violent revolutions that failed or succeeded increased the chances of civil wars or dictatorships. Strikingly, they found that no single campaign has failed during the time period after they achieved the active and sustained participation of just 3.5 percent of the population. Every campaign that made it over 3.5 percent was a nonviolent one.

This makes me wonder: *what if we got just 3.5 percent of Christians in the United States to join a nonviolent civil resistance movement against White Christian nationalism?* What would be needed for success? According to Chenoweth and Stephan, there are three ingredients of a successful nonviolent resistance movement:

² Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

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1. broad participation by diverse groups,
2. shifting tactics that build pressure while minimizing repression,
3. and shifts in loyalties within key pillars of an opponent's power.³

Broad participation, shifting tactics, and shifts in loyalties. I will reflect some more on these points in what follows. For now, I invite you to stop for a second and seriously mull on one of Chenoweth and Stephan's major observations: when participation increases, success rates also increase.⁴

This essay is an invitation to participate—to move beyond discussions about objects of resistance (or deconstruction) and toward actions related to strategies of nonviolent resistance (or reconstruction).

So, how did we get here?

In a recent viral Tweet, Rainn Wilson (best known as Dwight Schrute from *The Office*) wrote, “The metamorphosis of Jesus Christ from a humble servant of the abject poor to a symbol that stands for gun rights, prosperity theology, anti-science, limited government (that neglects the destitute) and fierce nationalism is truly the strangest transformation in human history.”⁵ As a historian of early Christianity, I say—“amen.” But how did we get here—to a place where self-proclaimed Christians profess loyalty to a Jesus who repudiates strangers, builds walls, and fears ethno-racial difference? And how can better understanding this historical moment influence our strategies of resistance for challenging White Christian nationalism?

Social media and hyperpartisanship

To understand this historical moment we need to have some hard conversations about the impact of social media on human relationships. I've watched in disbelief over the past decade as people in my own social network have become co-opted by misinformation and conspiracy theories

³ For a summary of this thesis, see Erica Chenoweth, “The Success of Nonviolent Civil Resistance,” TEDx Talk, September 2013, video, 12:33, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YJSehRIU34w>.

⁴ See: Rain Wilson (@RainWilson), “The metamorphosis of Jesus Christ from a humble servant of the abject poor to a symbol that stands for gun rights, prosperity theology, anti-science, limited government (that neglects the destitute) and fierce nationalism is truly the strangest transformation in human history,” Twitter, August 3, 2019, 3:35 p. m., <https://twitter.com/rainnwilson/status/1157736650274828288?lang=en>.

over the idea that America is in decline and under attack by a “woke mob.” Basic facts we could agree on even ten years ago—like the value of science and immunizations—no longer feel like common ground.

Research shows that misinformation spreads six times faster than true information on the internet.⁶ During the 2016 election, the top twenty fake news articles on Facebook generated more clicks than the top twenty real articles from every major publication combined.⁷ According to psychologists, fake news is an intoxicating way to distort the truth because it reinforces a human tendency to accept information that affirms our beliefs.⁸ Psychologists call this “confirmation bias.” Fake news, especially when paired with “information overload” or “data saturation” (i.e., high volumes of articles with thousands of likes), is excellent at leveraging confirmation bias because it can cause the brain to process information with the emotion center of the brain rather than those involved in reasoning or logic.⁹

Some studies have even shown that such emotional processing, satisfied by flip re-Tweets and shares, spark a dopamine rush in the brain like a drug, creating a positive feedback loop between sharing fake news and heightening pleasure. According to other researchers, this cycle of disinformation is exacerbated by political polarization. One group of psychologists recently analyzed the behavioral sharing patterns of five hundred thousand news story headlines among 2,300 Americans on Twitter and found that the inclination to share fake news had less to do with being misinformed or uneducated and much to do with hating one’s political opponent.¹⁰ In other words, hate trumps truth and fuels the spread of fake news about one’s

⁶ See <https://www.science.org/doi/full/10.1126/science.aap9559>.

⁷ A “Why do our Brains Love Fake News?” Above the Noise Collection, PBS, n.d., <https://indiana.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/bias-brain-kqed/why-do-our-brains-love-fake-news-above-the-noise/>.

⁸ Cecily Steenbuch Traberg, “Why we Fall for Fake News on our Own Social Media Feeds,” *Psychology Today*, May 13, 2022, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/social-influence-and-misinformation/202205/why-we-fall-fake-news-our-own-social-media-feeds>.

⁹ “Why do our Brains Love Fake News?,” <https://indiana.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/bias-brain-kqed/why-do-our-brains-love-fake-news-above-the-noise/>.

¹⁰ Mathias Osmundsen, Alexander Bor et al., “Partisan Polarization is the Primary Psychological Motivation Behind Political Fake News Sharing on Twitter,” *American Political Science Review* 15, no. 3 (May 6, 2021), <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/american-political-science-review/article/abs/partisan-polarization-is-the-primary-psychological-motivation-behind-political-fake-news-sharing-on-twitter/3F7D2098CD87AE5501F7AD4A7FA83602>.

ideological opponents.

Fueling the proliferation of misinformation is what scholars call “surveillance capitalism.” Lisa Schirch, who is a scholar of violent extremism and Peace Studies, writes that surveillance capitalism “harvests private data and experiences and then sells access to this data. This economic model monetizes private experiences based on tracking or surveilling their every click on the internet.”¹¹ This economic model incentivizes “brain hacking” by creating “an economic motivation for designing social media platforms to be addicting.”¹² In other words, there is a cause and effect relationship between outrage, addiction, and making more money for tech-oligarchs and their bureaucrats.

Cognitive biases and brain hacking have also contributed to the proliferation of what scholars call “segregated information ecosystems.” Within these “information silos,” Americans live in different interpretive realities about current events, which lends to declining trust, growing resentment between partisan groups, and an “us” vs. “them” mentality.¹³ The ensuing hyperpartisanship, according to one recent report by leading scholars, “are undermining Americans’ ability to come together across lines of differences to devise solutions to common problems. From a stalemated Congress, to local school boards embroiled in conflict, to families and friends torn apart, these dynamics touch every part of our lives and threaten the very core of our democracy.”¹⁴

The threat to democracy is real—so, too, is the threat to the church’s witness. I wonder: Can congregations become spaces for dialogue and trust building in order to challenge brain hacking reduce “meta-perceptions”? (that is, what others think about us that stimulate perception gaps that can lead to cultural and even direct violence).¹⁵ One step in this direction is to (1) name surveillance capitalism as a medium for (not against) division

¹¹ Lisa Schirch, ed., *Social Media Impacts on Conflict and Democracy: The Tectonic Shift* (New York: Routledge, 2021), 13.

¹² Schirch, *Social Media Impacts*, 13.

¹³ “Renewing American Democracy: Navigating a Changing Nation: A Report of Beyond Conflict’s America’s Divided Mind Initiative (Boston, MA: Beyond Conflict, n.d.), 13, <https://beyondconflictint.org/renewing-american-democracy>.

¹⁴ “Renewing American Democracy,” 13.

¹⁵ On perception gaps, see “Renewing American Democracy,” 29.

and polarization; (2) create spaces for educating congregants to detect misinformation; and (3) name and understand the structural inequalities that have contributed to the radicalization of some members of our families and communities.

Third order suffering

In addition to social media's impact on polarization, we need to have some hard conversations about structural problems in our society. One of the most profound books I've read in the past decade is by Bruce Rogers-Vaughn, titled, *Caring For Souls in a Neoliberal Age*.¹⁷ Rogers-Vaughn is a psychotherapist and pastor theologian who is concerned about how the governing philosophy of our time called "neoliberalism" has impacted our souls. Neoliberalism, in short, is a mutation of capitalism from an economic theory to a moral philosophy that redefines human existence around consumption and competition abetted by deregulation and the privatization of public services (e.g., medical care, banking, insurance, social media, etc.).¹⁸

The result, according to Rogers-Vaughn, has been a disaster for human souls as we are forced to compete with our neighbors in a rigged gig economy of income inequality. According to this moral philosophy and purported meritocracy, those who find themselves failing in the hustle culture that is neoliberalism simply haven't worked hard enough. As Adam Kotsko argues,

We have to be in a constant state of high alert, always "hustling" for opportunities and connections, always planning for every contingency (including the inherently unpredictable vagaries of health and longevity). This . . . requires us to fritter away our life with worry and paperwork and supplication, "pitching" ourselves over and over again, building our "personal brand"—all for ever-lowering wages or a smattering of piece-work, which barely covers increasingly exorbitant rent, much less student loan payments.¹⁹

¹⁷ Bruce Rogers-Vaughn, *Caring for Souls in a Neoliberal Age* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

¹⁸ For a helpful primer on neoliberalism, see Manfred B. Steger and Ravi K. Roy, *Neoliberalism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

¹⁹ Adam Kotsko, *Neoliberalism's Demons: On the Political Theology of Late Capital* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018), 95.

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Kotsko tips his hand to the soul-shattering forces of hustle culture, along with the entrepreneurial self where one individualizes and promotes a personal brand to leverage “success” in our hierarchical rat race. These economic and social pressures are not benign or always lucrative. Rather, according to Rogers-Vaughn, they have produced new forms of suffering wherein sufferers have no idea why they are suffering at all. I call this “zombie suffering.”

Rogers-Vaughn discusses three orders of human suffering. The first two orders of suffering are familiar. The first order is the human condition: death, grief, separation, illness, natural disaster, and physical pain.²⁰ The second order is human-on-human evil: war, robbery, sexualized violence, murder, etc.²¹ What Rogers-Vaughn calls “third order suffering” is more opaque and sneaky, wherein the neoliberal order has created a society of depression, anxiety, addiction, intense shame, loneliness, and a sense of personal failure. He writes:

The people I now see tend to manifest a far more diffuse or fragmented sense of self, are frequently more overwhelmed, experience powerful forms of anxiety and depression too vague to be named, display less self-awareness, have often loosened or dropped affiliations with conventional human collectives, and are increasingly haunted by shame rooted in a nebulous sense of personal failure.²²

Taken together, third order suffering and surveillance capitalism have created conditions that are ripe for radicalization.

The adverse impact of isolation on online radicalization is backed up by an organization called Moonshot CVE (Countering Violent Extremism), whose vision is to “develop new tech and methodologies to expose threats, disrupt malicious actors and protect vulnerable audiences online.”²³ Moonshot CVE has developed an algorithm called the “redirect method” that uses “targeted advertising to connect people searching online for

²⁰ Rogers-Vaughn, *Caring for Souls in a Neoliberal Age*, 126.

²¹ Rogers-Vaughn, *Caring for Souls in a Neoliberal Age*, 126.

²² Rogers-Vaughn, *Caring for Souls in a Neoliberal Age*, 2.

²³ See <https://moonshotteam.com/>.

harmful content with constructive alternative messages.”²⁴ The redirect method functions as a strategy of counter-radicalization by redirecting far right audiences to testimonies from former neo-Nazis and mental health resources.²⁵ In January 2017, Moonshot CVE employed the redirect method on Google and Twitter to see if users searching to join violent far right groups were more likely to click on mental health ads than comparison groups. They found that users looking to join these extremist groups were 115 percent more likely to click on mental health ads.²⁶ They also found that during COVID lockdowns searches for extremist content in Canada’s six largest cities went up by double digits, signaling the connection between isolation and radicalization.²⁷

What does Moonshot CVE’s work say about the relationship between loneliness, isolation, dwindling human collectives, and online radicalization? The famous philosopher Hannah Arendt observed an interconnection between these dynamics when she wrote extensively about totalitarianism in the aftermath of World War II. In her monumental *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, first published in 1951, she argued that totalitarian regimes exploited isolation and terror toward ideological ends.²⁸ She writes, “What prepares men [and women] for totalitarian domination in the non-totalitarian world is the fact that loneliness, once a borderline experience usually suffered in certain marginal social conditions like old age, has become an everyday experience.”²⁹ For Christians against White Christian nationalism, can naming and challenging third order suffering increase our empathy for those whose lives have been commodified by the neoliberal

²⁴ “The Redirect Method,” Moonshot, accessed February 2, 2023, <https://moonshotteam.com/the-redirect-method/>.

²⁵ Alex Pasternack, “One Secret Method against Extremism: Google Ads Promoting Mindfulness,” *Fast Company*, March 11, 2021, <https://www.fastcompany.com/90607977/moonshot-digital-counter-radicalization-google-ads-mindfulness-redirect-method>.

²⁶ “Mental Health and Violent Extremism,” Moonshot, accessed February 18, 2023, <https://moonshotteam.com/wp-content/uploads/Moonshot-CVE-Mental-Health-and-Violent-Extremism.pdf>.

²⁷ “The Impact of COVID-19 on Canadian Search Traffic,” Moonshot, June 2020, https://149736141.v2.pressablecdn.com/wp-content/uploads/The-Impact-of-COVID-19-on-Canadian-Search-Traffic_Moonshot-CVE.pdf

²⁸ See Samantha Hill’s helpful essay on the loneliness motif in Hannah Arendt’s writings, titled, “Where Loneliness Can Lead,” <https://aeon.co/essays/for-hannah-arendt-totalitarianism-is-rooted-in-loneliness>

²⁹ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: A Harvest Book, 1968), 176.

order?³⁰ And in leaning into empathy, can empathy become a strategy for disorienting and challenging Ambassadors and Accommodators of White Christian nationalism?

Empathy as resistance

Not all White Christian nationalists are victims in the neoliberal order. Many, in fact, benefit from the system and leverage its commodification of human souls toward their own interests. Still, as Pamela Cooper-White argues, it is crucial to recognize that “Empathy is not the same thing as sympathy.”³¹ In other words, offering empathy toward a White Christian nationalist does not mean we have to affirm their theology or worldview. I know of no one who has explored this complex and challenging space more than author, podcaster, and stand-up actor Dylan Marron. Marron is a gay digital creator who made a video series called “Every Single Word,” where he edited down popular films to only the words spoken by people of color.³² For example, Marron’s method cut down the 558-minute *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy to forty-six seconds! As Marron posted this material to social media, he received vile, homophobic, and vicious comments from strangers that he filed away in what he calls a “HATE FOLDER.”

After a profound interaction with an internet troll (I won’t spoil the story for you), Marron began reaching out to people in his HATE FOLDER to see if they would be open to having a recorded conversation. In Marron’s own words, “Sometimes the most subversive thing you could do was to speak with the people you disagreed with, and not simply at them.”³³ Rather than engage in back and forth on social media (which rarely goes well!) Marron began messaging his internet haters and simply asking them: “Why did you

³⁰ Some studies have even shown that economic hardship had little to do with supporting Trump. Instead, “status threat” against historically privileged persons (Whites, Christians, and men) was a much stronger predictor. See Diana C. Mutz, “Status Threat, Not Economic Hardship, Explains the 2016 Presidential Vote,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science* 115 no.19 (April 23, 2018), <https://www.pnas.org/doi/pdf/10.1073/pnas.1718155115>.

³¹ Pamela Cooper-White, *The Psychology of Christian Nationalism: Why People are Drawn In and How to Talk Across the Divide* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2022), 107.

³² For details of this experience, see: Dylan Marron, “Empathy is not Endorsement,” TED Talk, May 18, 2018, video, 12:33, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=waVUm5bhLbg&t=35s>.

³³ Marron, “Empathy is not Endorsement,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=waVUm5bhLbg&t=35s>.

write that?” The ensuing recorded conversations became a widely viewed podcast and now a book, titled *Conversations with People Who Hate Me*.³⁴ Marron’s goal is to take “negative online comments and turn them into positive offline conversations that humanize the other.”³⁵ The way Marron’s empathy disorients enmity is breathtaking—some are even calling him the “Mr. Rogers of the internet.” Underlying Marron’s theory of challenging polarization is his conviction that “[e]mpathy is not endorsement” and that the internet “is not built to mitigate conflict; in fact, it seems like it’s built to sustain it.”³⁶ Marron is quick to acknowledge that empathy is “not a prescription for activism. . . some people don’t feel safe talking to their detractors . . . and others feel so marginalized that they justifiably don’t feel like they have any empathy to give.”³⁷ This point is important: not all of us are in a position to have conversations with people who hate us.

I recently had the opportunity to experiment with Marron’s approach to vile social media comments. After I wrote a blog post on White Christian nationalism and 9/11 for the Mennonite Church USA’s “Cost of War” series, I received a vile comment by an internet stranger who questioned my faith and ended his rant by saying that “Menno Simons would be ashamed of you!” (Simons is a famous sixteenth century Anabaptist, and I teach at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary). I chose not to respond publicly and immediately wrote him a private message on Facebook that said something like this: “Dear so and so: I hope and pray that you’re doing well. I don’t believe we’ve met. I saw your comments on Facebook today about me. I’d be happy to have a conversation anytime about what it means to follow Jesus in this moment. Let me know if you’re ever available. I’d be more than happy to talk on the phone or via Zoom. In Christ, Drew.” When I woke up the next morning the stranger did not respond to my message, but he did delete his comment. In some small way that private message was enough to humanize my dignity as a real, living person.

Marron’s work has taught me that empathy can be strategic and subversive. Empathy is a strategy of active resistance rather than passivity

³⁴ Dylan Marron, *Conversations with People Who Hate Me: 12 Things I Learned from Talking to Internet Strangers* (New York: Atria Books, 2022).

³⁵ Marron, “Empathy is not Endorsement,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=waVUm5bhLbg&t=35s>.

³⁶ Marron, *Conversations with People Who Hate Me*, 41 and 127-144.

³⁷ Dylan Marron, “Empathy is not Endorsement,” TED Talk, April 2018, video, 10:52, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=waVUm5bhLbg&t=288s>.

and deference. It can disorient enmity and polarization and create the conditions for peacebuilding. Most importantly, it is not an endorsement of our theological opponents' actions and beliefs, nor is it an invitation to hide our prophetic teeth. Rather, empathy is a way to create space for dialogue.

Dialogue, conversion, shifts in loyalty?

Dialogue is a crucial tool for challenging White Christian nationalism. The stakes are high. As Lisa Schirch and David Campt write, "In the next century, our very lives may depend on how well we as individuals, communities, and members of humanity can creatively address the challenges before us with tools of dialogue rather than with weaponry, coercion, or force."³⁸ The alternatives to dialogue are direct violence and division.

In the work and discipline of strategic peacebuilding, "dialogue" is a special term used to describe "a process for talking about tension-filled topics."³⁹ It is a "communication process that aims to build relationships between people as they share experiences, ideas, and information about common concerns."⁴⁰ In this sense, dialogue is different from "conversation, discussion, training or education and debate."⁴¹ Rather than being merely a strategy of persuasion, dialogue focuses on building relationships with the presence of a trained facilitator. While "civility" and "impartiality" can be viable peacebuilding strategies, dialogue does not mean one has to soften their prophetic teeth or lean away from truth telling; rather, shifting power and building relationship bridges go hand-in-hand.⁴² This point is especially important to remember for the church's role in challenging racial injustice and the White supremacy that many Christian nationalists are trying to preserve and maintain.

³⁸ Lisa Schirch and David Campt, *The Little Book of Dialogue for Difficult Subjects: A Practical, Hands-On Guide* (Intercourse: Good Books, 2015), 78.

³⁹ Schirch and Campt, *Dialogue for Difficult Subjects*, 5.

⁴⁰ Schirch and Campt, *Dialogue for Difficult Subjects*, 6.

⁴¹ Schirch and Campt, *Dialogue for Difficult Subjects*, 6.

⁴² See especially Lisa Schirch, "Transforming the Colour of US Peacebuilding: Types of Dialogue to Protect and Advance Multi-Racial Democracy," *Toda Peace Institute Policy Brief*, no. 114 (September 2021): 1-17, https://toda.org/assets/files/resources/policy-briefs/t-pb-114_lisa-schirch_transforming-the-colours-of-us-peacebuilding.pdf.

A full-blown guide to facilitated dialogue is beyond the scope of this essay. However, pastors are not without good and highly readable resources on this. I especially commend Lisa Schirch and David Camp's *The Little Book of Dialogue for Difficult Subjects* and, more recently, Pamela Cooper-White's *The Psychology of Christian Nationalism: Why People are Drawn In and How to Talk Across the Divide*.⁴³ Cooper-White's book, in particular, gives me hope as she pushes back at other psychologists and journalists who publicly argued that "you can't reason with a Trump supporter." In contrast, Cooper-White interrogates the conscious and unconscious motivations that lead people to participate in cults and the ways followers hand their conscience over to a demagogue who promises to restore whatever is lacking in their lives. In this paradigm, the strong man is a father figure and narcissist who loves only himself but his followers are in need of the illusion of being loved by the strong man. Cooper-White argues that direct argument will almost never work with those hardened by "group think" since we are talking to an entire network of right wing propaganda, disinformation, and conspiracy theory that is hardened into the conscience through data saturation and confirmation bias. To "deprogram" we have to create pathways for recovery and sobriety, which includes reducing exposure to the strongman, his media empire and, ultimately, changing the structural circumstances that led to their radicalization (e.g., poverty, lack of community, neoliberalism, etc.).

In contrast to direct argument, Cooper-White believes in "talk" or what she calls "triage" (which is really just another word for "dialogue"). Cooper-White writes that, "Triage involves not only assessing how hardened the potential dialogue partner is in their beliefs, and who is the right messenger, but also assessing the context—is this the right time, the right place, the right social context in which to have such a discussion?"⁴⁴ Within this discernment she offers a helpful red, yellow and green light paradigm to minimize the potential for harm:

- Red Light: STOP—talking will do no good—at least not here, not now, not by me.

⁴³ See Schirch and Camp, *Dialogue for Difficult Subjects*; and Cooper-White, *The Psychology of Christian Nationalism*.

⁴⁴ Cooper-White, *The Psychology of Christian Nationalism*, 104.

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- Yellow light: try but tread lightly.
- Green light: go deeper, gently and wisely.⁴⁵

I found it freeing and encouraging that Cooper-White is also quick to acknowledge that not everyone is in a position to engage White Christian nationalists and that it's okay to say "I disagree" and calmly walk away. Still, having preemptive dialogue strategies in place, including safe and healthy exit plans, is crucial for pastors as we imagine how dialogue can be wielded to challenge White Christian nationalism.

I will be the first to confess that I've had little luck challenging Ambassadors of Christian nationalism in my social network through in-person dialogue or comment threads on social media.⁴⁶ In my moments of despair, I've also wondered if this type of toxic theology can only come out through prayer? I don't say this to sound hyperbolic or overly-religious—we need to pray! I want to encourage us, however, not to think of full-scale conversion as the only option for bending the worldview of White Christian nationalists closer to Jesus, equity, and justice. Instead, I want to encourage us to think about shifting Christian nationalists' biblical convictions about key issues like immigration, gun violence, police brutality, structural racism, and so on, one step toward Resisters and Rejecters of White Christian nationalism. To be clear, this is not an invitation to become more liberal in the partisan political sense; rather, this is an invitation to become more like the life and teachings of Jesus.

One way to conceptualize these small shifts in loyalty comes from an organizing tool from George Lakey's concept of the "spectrum of allies."⁴⁷ Underlying this theory of change is the idea that "Movements and campaigns are won not by overpowering one's active opposition, but by shifting each group one notch around the spectrum (passive allies into active allies,

⁴⁵ On this paradigm, see Cooper-White, *The Psychology of Christian Nationalism*, 105-124.

⁴⁶ Pastors should consider the point that Accommodators are a more strategic group for changing minds about power, boundaries, and order than Ambassadors of White Christian nationalism. According to Whitehead and Perry, Accommodators make up 32.1 percent of America and lean toward White 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), *Taking American Back for God*, 33-36.

⁴⁷ "Spectrum of Allies," Beautiful Trouble, accessed February 18, 2023, <https://beautifultrouble.org/toolbox/tool/spectrum-of-allies/>

neutrals into passive allies, and passive opponents into neutrals).⁴⁸ In the case of White Christian nationalism, we can visualize these shifts in loyalty as turning Resisters into Rejecters, Accommodators into Resisters, and Ambassadors into Accommodators.

For me, the spectrum of allies is a helpful and more realistic way of framing conflict and social transformation. So often in Christian culture we think of full-scale conversion as the only way to transform our theological opponents and society at large. Yes, let's pray for and work toward conversion and repentance—but small shifts along the spectrum of allies through *empathy* and *dialogue* may prove to be a more effective way to change minds about God, power, race, and human difference (not to mention the life and teachings of Jesus).

The political metaphor of idolatry

It is important to acknowledge that Christians against White Christian nationalism living in the 2020s are not the first generation of believers to negotiate political idolatry. Israel, after all, was birthed in the context of enslavement to Pharaoh in Egypt, the northern kingdom was exiled by Assyrian empire in 722 BCE, and the southern kingdom by Babylonian empire in 587 BCE. During the tumultuous five-hundred-year period leading up to the birth of Jesus, the people of God lived under the Persians, Greeks, Seleucids, Ptolemies and, finally, the Romans. Proclaiming loyalty to the one God incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth was as much a political act as a theological one. What wisdom can we learn from ancient Jewish and Christian communities?⁴⁹

In my first essay I argued that, in ancient Judaism, idolatry was a form of cognitive error—or what ancient rabbis called *avodah zarah* (strange worship). Here I wish to add that in the ancient Jewish context idolatry was not exclusively something that happened in the sphere of religion (the worship of other gods), but also in the sphere of politics (the veneration of royal power). The problem, then, is that so often in our modern context we reduce our understanding of idolatry to the worship of nonpolitical objects

⁴⁸ "Spectrum of Allies."

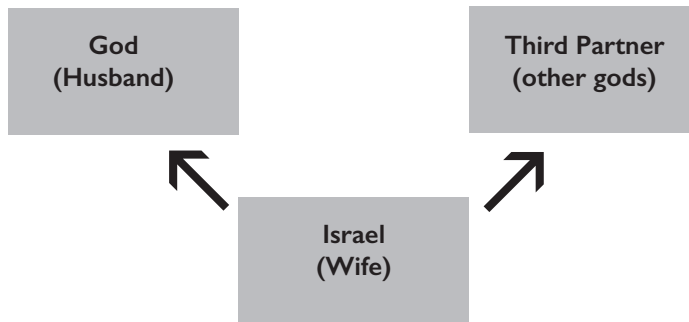
⁴⁹ For an overview of early Jewish negotiation of political idolatry, see Drew J. Strait, *Hidden Criticism of the Angry Tyrant in Early Judaism and the Acts of the Apostles* (Minneapolis: Lexington/Fortress Press Academic, 2019).

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of power.⁵⁰ If we take the Bible seriously, political objects of power are also a competing loyalty that can lead to strange worship.

Ancient Jews had two metaphors for understanding idolatry. The first metaphor is called the marital metaphor of idolatry. The marital metaphor is binary or black and white and it tends to dominate our modern understandings of idolatry. In this metaphor, God is perceived as the sovereign king who is in an exclusive covenant relationship with Israel the wife. When Israel worships another god, she fornicates with a third partner and thereby commits adultery/idolatry against God. It can be visualized like this:

The marital metaphor is patriarchal and in some Old Testament texts



misogynistic. Its binary nature also cannot account for the complexity of gestures toward state power that can lead to idolatry. To interrogate the gestures that lead to political idolatry, ancient Jews drew on a different metaphor that we call the political metaphor of idolatry. The political metaphor, in my mind, is a neglected tool for understanding how and why White Christian nationalism is an idolatrous third partner in our relationship with God.

The political metaphor is more complex than the marital metaphor.⁵¹

⁵⁰ For a fuller discussion of this challenge, see Drew J. Strait, “Political Idolatry and White Christian Nationalism: Toward a Pastoral Hermeneutic of Resistance,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 96 (2022): 47-72.

Instead of a binary model of discernment, it adopts a triangulated model to interrogate the boundaries of political power. At the core of the political metaphor is God's political sovereignty and exclusivity as Creator, Lord, King, Mother, Savior, and so on. The primary question that the political metaphor of idolatry addresses is: How exclusive is God's political sovereignty? Put another way, when does our loyalty to political institutions betray our loyalty to Jesus and God's kingdom and lead to strange worship? As Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit ask, "Is the relationship of political loyalty to God so exclusive that any other political loyalty is considered a betrayal, and therefore a form of idolatry?"⁵²

In the political metaphor, the threatening third party is the veneration of political authorities (including kings, queens, or presidents) and the veneration of political institutions (including the military, economy, or even taxation). One sectarian Jewish movement called the Fourth Philosophy during the time of Jesus even believed that paying taxes to Caesar was an act of political idolatry (see Josephus, *Ant.* 18.23-24; *War* 2.118, 425; *Acts* 5:36-37). In the political metaphor, the threatening third party could also be royal ideologies—or discourses of power that distract us from giving loyalty to God alone.

In contrast to the binary nature of the marital metaphor, the political metaphor is "divisible" in the sense that political authority can distribute power to associates or even transfer the sovereignty of God to oneself, hence the problem of deification, including the deification of a political system.⁵³ As Halbertal and Margalit write, "The biblical problem with a powerful person is how to prevent the tendency to self-deification."⁵⁴ To curtail royal hubris when Israel transitioned from a theocracy to a monarchy, the Book of Deuteronomy articulated the "Law of the King" to prohibit the Israelite king from a path toward self-deification through the accumulation of weapons, women, and wealth (*Deut* 17:14-19). The king was also required to read the "Law of the King" daily so as to "not exalt himself above other members of

⁵¹ Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, *Idolatry* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 215.

⁵² Halbertal and Margalit, *Idolatry*, 228ff.

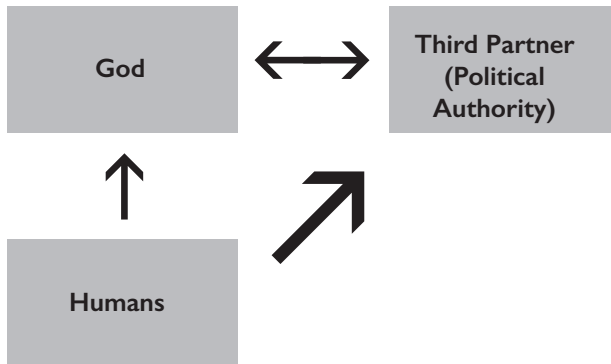
⁵³ Halbertal and Margalit, *Idolatry*, 228ff.

⁵⁴ Halbertal and Margalit, *Idolatry*, 220.

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the community” (Deut 17:20). The “Law of the King” democratized Israel’s monarchy and thwarted political hubris that can lead to deification. We can visualize the triangulated way political authority can become a competing loyalty to God in this way:

Of note, unlike the marital metaphor, there is an arrow between God



and the third partner in the political metaphor that goes both directions to signify the ways political authorities can co-opt God’s sovereignty for oneself (including the ways God can share sovereignty with subordinate authorities). The pastoral question for Christ’s church today, then, is: What gestures and postures toward political authority lead to political idolatry and strange worship in our modern context?

I have six suggestions for gaining clarity around this question as it relates to White Christian nationalism.⁵⁵ While this list is not comprehensive, it offers a starting point for us to think critically about the boundaries of the political metaphor in our current political climate. Here, I suggest that political power becomes an idolatrous third partner. . .

1. When loyalty to state power distorts our exclusive loyalty to the life and teachings of Jesus.
2. When loyalty to state power inspires and/or legitimates harm toward our neighbor.
3. When loyalty to state power sees the state—rather than the unarmed,

⁵⁵ See also Strait, “Political Idolatry and White Christian Nationalism,” 65.

multi-cultural church—as the primary context for Christian action, mission, and witness.

4. When pledging loyalty to the state subverts the value we place on our baptismal identity.
5. When loyalty to state power stimulates a hierarchical ethno-racial caste system—an “us” vs. “them” view of ethno-racial difference.
6. When Christians approach partisan political loyalties with a posture of absolute or deferent trust rather than suspicion.

In defining political idolatry and naming the gestures toward political power that lead to it, I hope to offer pastors a more descriptive framework for educating congregations about why White Christian nationalism is an idolatrous third partner that undermines our loyalty to the whole life of Jesus.

Teach the whole life of Jesus

A key predictor of Ambassadors of White Christian nationalism is belief in the Bible, including belief in the Bible as the literal word of God and as perfectly true.⁵⁶ This creates an uncomfortable reality for Christians against Christian nationalism. Indeed, one of the few shared values between White Christian nationalists and Christians against Christian nationalism is a shared value of the Bible’s authority for making sense of salvation and Christian discipleship. Even former president Donald Trump audaciously claimed, “Nobody reads the Bible more than me.”⁵⁷ Really, though? In this sense, effective resistance against White Christian nationalism is a contestation over the Bible’s meaning and the kind of world it invites its hearers to nurture.

Perhaps I am biased as a New Testament scholar, but I think that biblical interpretation and preaching *the whole life of Jesus* might be the most effective tools we have for disorienting the worldview of White Christian nationalists. This is especially true since the Bible is a point of common ground. For some, this might mean creating facilitated spaces to read

⁵⁶ See Andrew Whitehead and Samuel Perry, *Taking American Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 12.

⁵⁷ For the quote’s context, see: Stoyen Zaimov, “Donald Trump: ‘Nobody Reads the Bible More than Me; John Kerry hasn’t Read the Bible,’” *The Christian Post*, February 25, 2016, <https://www.christianpost.com/news/donald-trump-nobody-reads-bible-more-than-me-john-kerry.html>

Scripture with White Christian nationalists in our networks. For all pastors and leaders, it definitely means faithfully preaching the whole life of Jesus in order to nurture immunization from the kinds of distorted Christology that is foundational for White Christian nationalists' theological worldview. To challenge White Christian nationalism, *we need to preach the whole life of Jesus*.⁵⁸

I have personally experienced the disorienting power of teaching the whole life of Jesus to Christian nationalists in the classroom. When I taught "Introduction to the New Testament" at Saint Mary's Ecumenical Institute in Baltimore, Maryland, I routinely had students from across the political and theological spectrum in my classes. Sometimes I even had a few Ambassadors and Accommodators of White Christian nationalism sitting next to Resisters and Rejecters. Amidst this vast difference, I was struck that I could get Ambassadors and Accommodators to track with my critique of neoliberalism, White supremacy, mass incarceration, and structural racism as long as I stayed close to the whole life of Jesus in its ancient context. But the second I shifted from what the text meant to what I think it means today, I immediately lost my Ambassador and Accommodator students, who argued that my interpretation was a socialist, liberal, or Democratic reading. On the one hand, this experience reminded me just how clouded some of these students' interpretive lenses are by partisan loyalties. I call this "state-centric hermeneutics." On the other hand, it gave me hope that staying close to the biblical text—especially the whole life of Jesus—can nurture shifts of loyalty. In the Anabaptist tradition, we call this "Christocentric hermeneutics."

A Christ-centered or Christocentric hermeneutic means placing more emphasis on the ethics of Jesus's proclamation of the kingdom of God. As scholars like Scot McKnight have argued, there is a danger in many Evangelical circles of reducing the gospel to personal salvation found in the death of Jesus or Paul's doctrine of justification.⁵⁹ This version of the

⁵⁸ This emphasis on preaching the whole life of Jesus is evident when early Christian scribes copied the four gospels, which came to us anonymously, they wrote headings that often said, "Gospel According to Mark," etc. This signifies that, according to these early scribes, the gospel was the life, death and resurrection of Jesus: when we preach the whole life of Jesus we are preaching the good news of the gospel.

gospel is hollow and myopic because, as McKnight suggests, Jesus did not preach Paul's doctrine of justification (as so many pastors do in the Reformed Evangelical tradition today). Rather, the primary subject of Jesus's teaching was the arrival of the kingdom of God through "the Story of Israel that comes to completion in the saving Story of Jesus."⁶⁰ Jesus's gospel message was something bigger and more all-encompassing than personal salvation, including the arrival of personal and cosmic salvation, peace, justice, reparation, debt release, and the forgiveness of our sins. This is good news for the restoration of friendship between humans and God, but also friendship between humans and one another.

As I always tell my students, if we get kingdom wrong, we are going to get the life and teachings of Jesus wrong. The kingdom of God was the centering message of Jesus's life and ministry. The perennial danger is the temptation to conflate the kingdom of God with the weaponized kingdoms of this world. This temptation is pervasive among White Christian nationalists. Yet when Jesus is tempted by Satan in the wilderness in Luke's gospel, Satan offers Jesus authority over all the kingdoms of this world because "it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please" (Luke 4:6). The passage implies (with a subtle critique of Rome) that the empires of this world lie under the authority of Satan. Jesus repudiates this offer of political power by recognizing that it is a test to see if he will break the boundaries of the political metaphor of idolatry. Like the good king in Deuteronomy 17, Jesus repudiates Satan's offer of weapons, women, and wealth by quoting the first commandment: "Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him" (Luke 4:8). For Jesus, the seduction of imperial power is incompatible with loyalty to and proclamation of God's coming kingdom. This kingdom, in fact, will not arrive through military might and cultural violence but, rather, through a new covenant of peace inaugurated through Jesus's death and resurrection (Luke 22:14-23; 1 Cor 11:23-26).⁶¹

A biblical emphasis on preaching the whole life of Jesus is especially

⁵⁹ Scot McKnight, *The King Jesus Gospel: The Original Good News Revisited* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011).

⁶⁰ McKnight, *The King Jesus Gospel*, 147.

⁶¹ See Drew J. Strait, "From Salvation Culture to Peace Culture: Luke's Gospel of Christ's Peace," in *Living the King Jesus Gospel: Discipleship and Ministry Then and Now*, ed. Tijay Gupta et al (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2021), 29-31.

evident in one of the most well-known passages in Matthew's Gospel called the Great Commission. In my experience, the Great Commission is often wielded as a proof text to emphasize mission to the ends of the earth at the expense of any ethical demands. The passage is equally an invitation for the church to emphasize the teachings of Jesus. Within the aims of Jesus, mission and ethics go hand in hand. Matthew writes,

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had commanded them. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. And Jesus drew near and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. **Go therefore and make disciples** of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and **teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you**. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (emphasis mine, Matt 28:16-20).

While Jesus commissions the church to make disciples of all nations, in the same breath, he also commands the church to teach disciples "to obey everything that I have commanded you." This means teaching about Jesus's teachings on power, boundaries, and order, including inclusive table fellowship with marginalized persons. It also means teaching about Jesus's teachings on wealth ethics, violence, and active peacemaking in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus incarnated these ethical teachings as a sign and foretaste of the arrival of the kingdom of God. When disciples of Jesus do the same we become active participants in God's reconciling mission to bring peace and justice to earth—or what the New Testament calls a "new heaven and a new earth" (Rev 21:1; 2 Pet 3:13).

Notwithstanding Jesus's clear command, Christians have gone out of their way to explain away the ethical demands of the kingdom of God. The Sermon on the Mount's history of interpretation brings this point into focus. For some, the Sermon on the Mount is just an inward, spiritual disposition. For others, the Sermon on the Mount is only meant to be lived out by clergy. For some, it is an impossible ideal. For others, it is an interim ethic for a failed Jewish Messiah. For some, it is a template of heaven for the afterlife—and not life in this world. But for those of us who are Anabaptists or Anabaptist adjacent followers of Jesus, the Sermon on the Mount is a centering narrative for our baptismal identities. I am not trying to toot

our horn or claim that we have a monopoly on this vision of Christian discipleship. We don't. But I also don't want to water down our social and theological distinctives.

When the church emphasizes mission at the expense of ethics we create a shallow and colonizing gospel. We also create disciples with misplaced loyalties who are out of tune with the aims of Jesus. A pastoral approach to challenging White Christian nationalism demands fresh thinking around how we can empathetically and strategically bring White Christian nationalists into conversation with the whole life of Jesus.

Pathways for return and recovery in the local congregation

I believe the unarmed, multicultural church remains the primary context for challenging White Christian nationalism in the United States. Here, my intention is not to minimize the role other institutions, allies, democracy, and political participation can have on harm reduction and equity and inclusion in our society. Rather, my concern is that some of the loudest voices who are challenging White Christian nationalism have prioritized platforming “saving democracy” over (and sometimes even against!) the church's public witness.

It is not lost on me that this is an unpopular opinion. I get it—we live in a moment where Christians are best known by abuses of power, hypocrisy, and fear of strangers (rather than self-emptying, truth telling, and unwavering love for neighbor). And so, here, my intention is also not to minimize the harm churches have caused in our communities. We need to own this moment—warts and all—while reclaiming the church as a survivor-centered institution that holds power worshipers of all sorts accountable.

Even with these qualifications in mind, I worry that state power has the intoxicating capacity to co-opt Christians against White Christian nationalism but in a different key. As Stanley Hauerwas writes, “Religious people on both the Right and the Left share the presumption that America is the church.”⁶² America is not the church. I don't make this final point in this essay to “both sides” the Left and the Right or engage in superficial “third

⁶² Stanley Hauerwas, *War and the American Difference: Theological Reflections on Violence and National Identity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 16.

way” whataboutism. Rather, my intention is to reclaim local congregations as ground zero for mobilizing “people power” against White Christian nationalism.

The impact of congregations on minimizing Christian nationalist values is an empirical observation in Andrew Whitehead and Samuel Perry’s data-driven analysis of White Christian nationalism in the United States. We need to talk about this more. A major thesis of the book, in fact, is that religious commitment is not always a vector for Christian nationalism. Christian nationalism, they find, “often influences Americans’ opinions and behaviors in the exact opposite direction than traditional religious commitment does.”⁶³ Through survey questions, Whitehead and Perry find that statistically significant predictors for religious practice include caring for the sick and needy, economic justice, and consuming fewer goods. For Christian nationalists, on the other hand, these moral priorities are either statistically insignificant or negatively associated. Of equal interest, they find that Christian nationalists see military service as a vital component of “being a good person” while religious practice tends to nurture a negative association with military service.⁶⁴

Whitehead and Perry’s observation reminds us that the church matters for mitigating theologies of oppression. Moreover, congregations are full of people power that can be harnessed for the common good. The effectiveness of people power for mobilizing social change is not lost on scholars in an emerging field called “resistance studies.” These scholars of social protest movements observe that acts of resistance are reproductive and tend to mobilize more acts of resistance.⁶⁵ Put simply, resistance begets resistance. This point also corroborates Chenoweth and Stephan’s point, discussed at the outset of this essay, that when participation in nonviolent civil resistance increases, success rates also increase. Breaking silence is a strategy for mobilizing people power. In breaking our silence and defining

⁶³ Andrew Whitehead and Samuel Perry, *Taking America Back for God*, 20.

⁶⁴ Andrew Whitehead and Samuel Perry, *Taking America Back for God*, 14-15.

⁶⁵ See Mikael Baaz, Mona Lilja, and Stellan Vinthagen, *Researching Resistance and Social Change: A Critical Approach to Theory and Practice* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 26. For fuller discussion, see also Strait, “Political Idolatry and White Christian Nationalism,” 57-60.

White Christian nationalism, pastors in local congregations become strategic peacebuilding actors for mobilizing a movement against White Christian nationalism.

Ideally, I think this mobilization should be done in coordination with other local congregations with the support of church's trans-local institutions and their allies. This means creating spaces (perhaps even shared ones) to break silence, define White Christian nationalism, discuss the boundaries of political idolatry, and confront and challenge the structural realities that brought us to this place of polarization (especially disinformation on social media and third order suffering). A pastoral response to challenging White Christian nationalism must publicly name these dynamics in a posture of empathy and prophetic critique that is rooted in bearing witness to the *whole* life of Jesus.

Conclusion

Admittedly, challenging White Christian nationalism through mobilizing a massive evangelization movement is daunting and possibly even unrealistic. The most important thing pastors can do is to first and foremost prioritize looking inward before looking outward. This means inviting broad participation in our communities to stimulate small shifts in loyalties toward Jesus-centered values rather than empire-centered values. It also means focusing inwardly on the soul care and spiritual formation of congregations, family, and friends. For those who feel called to the external work of evangelism, it means creating access to human collectives for third order suffering, along with spaces for return, recovery, sobriety, repentance, and deprogramming from the lure and addiction of online radicalization. Most importantly, especially for those of us with unearned privilege and power, it also means showing up for the vulnerable and the historically marginalized in our communities who are most at risk of experiencing personal and structural harm by White Christian nationalists.

Pastors are also strategically located to intentionally position their congregations as spaces to facilitate dialogue across human difference in their communities. Not every congregation will have the resources or bandwidth for this kind of work, but for those who do, partnering with

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organizations like “The Colossian Forum” could offer hopeful pathways and trainings toward healing perception gaps between opposing groups.⁶⁶ At the very least, we can focus inwardly to inoculate congregants by strengthening their ability to detect misinformation, reduce exposure to theologies of oppression, and create on-ramps for recovery in diverse human collectives in Jesus-centered and life-giving communities of fellowship. I won’t pretend that any of this work will be easy or without failure. But breaking silence, experimentation, and creating spaces to share about our successes and failures is the only way to build collective wisdom about “so what” questions.

I wish to close with two points. First, a pastoral response to challenging White Christian nationalism is not an invitation to bear witness to an apolitical gospel or shy away from a robust public faith. Rather, I believe it is an invitation to bear witness publicly to the whole life of Jesus while critically maintaining a posture of suspicion—rather than deferent trust—toward state power. Maintaining this posture of suspicion toward the alluring power of the kingdoms of this world is crucial for all Christian leaders who enter the murky space of public faith.

Second, the God we serve, who was incarnated in Jesus of Nazareth, is a God who “desires those who desire idols.” As pastors and leaders against White Christian nationalism, we must never forget that the objects of our resistance are also an object of God’s love and desire.

⁶⁶ The Colossian Forum’s mission is “to equip leaders to transform cultural conflicts into opportunities for spiritual growth and witness,” <https://colossianforum.org/>.