

INTRO

Phrases partnering God and country are embedded in United States culture. “In God we trust” adorns our money. Pledging allegiance to the flag “under God” is a common practice. Clergy open many legislative sessions with prayer. “God Bless America” is sung at professional sporting events. To many, these are patriotic intersections of faith and citizenship. To others, they are evidence of, or arguments for, the blending of Christianity with political ideals, for *better* or for *worse*.

The “better” part of mixing God and national language serves to remind people of faith to love God and neighbors in public life as citizens.

The “worse” happens when so-called “Christian” ideals (and even Jesus) become ideological tools to serve and gain political power. This is “Christian Nationalism.” And we’re going to talk about it.

Politics, Power & CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM

This conversation will explore Christian Nationalism in several ways. We’ll look at what scripture tell us about Jesus and power. We’ll reflect on roots of religion in the US, and claims that the US is a “Christian nation.” We’ll check definitions of patriotism, nationalism, and how they work (or don’t) with Christianity. And we’ll talk about the dangers of Christian Nationalism, and engage it.

As always when potential idols are prodded, we humans can get prickly. Though the nature of this topic is “political,” your Brewed Theology authors are not setting a partisan “political agenda.” We do, however, unapologetically see Christian Nationalism as a problematic, un-Christian ideology that is most clearly demonstrated in far-right politics. *Please*: approach with *curiosity*, with *love*, and *grace*.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER

What does it mean to be Christian? What does it mean to be an American (US) citizen? Is the USA a “Christian nation?” Was it founded on “Christian principles?” What *are* Christian “principles?” How does your faith influence how you vote? How do your political leanings influence how you practice your faith, or where you go to church? Should those influence one another (and which shapes which)? What voting issues matter most to you? Does Jesus say anything about them? How does Jesus wield power?

BIBLE BASICS (& MORE) on Power, Politics, & Authorities

- **Exodus 20** – The Ten Commandments. Read the first carefully. Consider possible idols and “graven images.”
- **From Matthew’s Gospel** – **First, Jesus is tempted** by Satan in the wilderness with worldly power. What does Jesus do? **Second, Jesus says** we can’t serve “two masters.” **Third, Jesus shares** the “greatest commandment,” and offers a follow-up. How do political aspirations follow, or struggle with, these two commandments? (P.S. Jesus is quoting Deuteronomy 6.)
- **Roman 13:1-14** – The Apostle Paul says to be subject to worldly authorities. How do you read/hear this?
- **Philippians 2** – Called the “Christ Hymn.” How does Jesus exercise power? Who bows to whom?

ESSENTIAL READINGS and LISTENINGS

TERMS, DEFINITIONS, & PROBLEMS: PATRIOTISM, NATIONALISM, & CHRISTIANITY

Start here. This *Christianity Today* article by Paul D. Miller breaks down definitions, differentiates patriotism from nationalism and Christianity from Christian Nationalism, and affirms faithful political engagement. Written in the wake of the events of January 6, 2021. (possible paywall; free account to access)

IS THIS A “CHRISTIAN NATION”?

Two resources on the often-stated idea that the United States is a “Christian Nation.” What do you think?

--Encyclopedia Britannica: “**The Founding Fathers, Deism, and Christianity**”

--Associated Press on **what it means to call the US a “Christian nation,” and what the Constitution says.**

DEFINING CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM

Katherine Stewart is the author of *The Power Worshipers: Inside the Dangerous Rise of Religious Nationalism*. This interview with *Religion News Service* gives definitions (halfway down), and describes religious nationalism’s pursuit of power through key voting issues. You can also hear Stewart articulate her definition in **this one minute video here**, or in an **interview with *The Religious Studies Project* podcast** here.

WHICH SPEAKS LOUDER: JESUS OR AMERICA

Angela Denker, Lutheran Pastor and author of *Red State Christians*, reflects on attending a megachurch on the Fourth of July, the blurring of religion and patriotism, and the collision of love of God and love of country.

OWNING THE ORIGINS OF CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM

When did “Under God” and flags in sanctuaries start? Presbyterian podcasters interview Baptist Rev. Dr. Brian Kaylor about mainline denominations’ role in fostering Christian Nationalism, and why we need to engage it.

WEIRD AMERICA: NATION, CULTURE, EMPIRE, RELIGION

Pastor Brian Zahnd describes America (the USA) as all four of these. In this July 4, 2024 blog article, he describes things to celebrate, and things that are dangerous, in America the Nation, Culture, Empire, and Religion.

DANGERS OF DOWNPLAYING

Efforts to downplay Christian Nationalism often come from those who benefit from it, or just don’t see it. But as Beau Underwood writes, when denial comes from mainline Protestants, it’s jarring – even “aiding and abetting.”

THE ELCA ON CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) issued a social statement and an **advocacy document**, joining **other Christians** in calling it a “persistent threat.” Do some research on your denomination’s stance.

BONUS READINGS (for the stout of heart, and data junkies...)

ON DISPLAY: A CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM BREAKING POINT

The religious imagery on display throughout the January 6, 2021 attack on the US Capitol was a startling example of Christian Nationalism (CN) on display. **The Associated Press ran a story** detailing Christian symbols present. Voices on the Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN) denounced CN **in this video**. Yet, as time passes (and as **Time Magazine reports**), myths downplaying January 6th’s events are growing. And if we hope that CN sentiments have subsided, **a wide survey of Americans by PRRI** (Public Religion Research Institute) suggests that the persistence, prevalence, and dangers of Christian Nationalism (**and its correlative views** on race, immigration, gender, and more) still exist. [NOTE: There’s LOTS here (it is “bonus,” after all), so tread gently.]

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Homework readings are proven (at least in our minds) to boost thoughtfulness and conversation. While not required, they are highly suggested.