

## ***Christian Nationalism***

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Ancient Witness: Exodus 20:1-5a

On January 6, when the anti-American mob stormed our nation's capital building in a violent act of insurrection, we saw flags with the name of Trump and the name of Jesus. There were signs that said, "Trump is my president and Jesus is my savior." We saw both a gallows and the cross erected. We saw an insurrectionist offer a prayer in the name of Jesus at the podium in the Senate chamber.

And I was reminded of that famous saying attributed to Sinclair Lewis. Although there's no evidence that he actually said it, it's still a powerful statement: "When fascism comes to the United States, it will be wrapped in a flag and carrying a cross."

Thom Hartman recently wrote that a country slides into an oligarchy when its legislature ceases to attend to the needs of the majority of the people, and instead only passes laws and policies that help only an elite minority. And oligarchies can flip into fascism when there is a repudiation of the rule of law and the institutions of democracy itself. And most countries only recognize their fascism problem when it's too late, in the rear-view mirror.

Last week, a group of evangelical pastors and leaders issued a statement condemning Christian nationalism's role in the January 6 insurrection. As a pastor, I also signed this statement. They wrote:

*We know from experts on radicalization that one of the key elements is a belief that your actions are "blessed by God" and ordained by your faith. This is what allows so many people who hold to a Christian Nationalism view to be radicalized.*

*While we come from varied backgrounds and political stances, we stand together against the perversion of the Christian faith as we saw on January 6, 2021. We also stand against the theology and the conditions that led to the insurrection.*

There has been a long and sad history in this nation of this unholy alliance of the church and the state to uphold white supremacy. It was used to justify "manifest destiny" and the slaughter of Native Americans. And it was used to brutalize and enslave Africans who were kidnapped, brought to this land and sold as property.

We remember how the KKK adopted the symbol of the Christian cross in an arrogant display of the sick fusion of religion and the power of the state. And we must say—loudly and clearly—that a commitment to the way of Jesus is incompatible with white Christian nationalism and its call to violence. Our churches cannot be neutral. We must take the side of democracy, equality for all people, anti-racism and the common good for all people.

The statements also said,

*Just as it was tragically inconsistent for Christians in the 20th Century to support the Ku Klux Klan and Nazi ideology, it is unthinkable for Christians to support the Proud Boys, Oathkeepers, QAnon, 3 Percenters, America Firsters and similar groups.*

We need to reject the white Nationalist Jesus and remember that the real Jesus was a person of color—a poor brown-skinned Jewish peasant living in a white, Roman-occupied land. And he was murdered by the state and a sycophantic religion because he proclaimed that in God's kingdom the poor are blessed, not forgotten.

But we must be vigilant because this Christian Nationalism is insidious. It is constantly trying to creep in and encroach upon the church. And so, we need to remember what worship is.

Worship is an essential aspect of the Christian faith. Worship is about practicing our awareness. It's about opening up to the comforting, challenging and transforming presence of the Sacred Reality. Worship is not about getting; it's about giving. It's about offering oneself (as a "living sacrifice"). It's not a performance; we don't do it for applause. It's about putting oneself at the disposal of the Spirit. And the object of worship is always God and only God.

Worship is when we practice as a community putting God as number one in our lives and what that means, what that implies. So like Jesus, we come not to be served but to serve. That is why we call it a worship *service*. And it is in the serving that we are served. It is in "emptying ourselves" that we are made full. It is in the giving up and giving over of our lives that we gain Life.

And so worship is practicing this, practicing not focusing on ourselves or what we think we need or our agenda, but giving our whole selves over to the service of God.

Now making God our ultimate priority, giving God our ultimate allegiance is a very, very difficult thing to do! It requires practice, commitment, determination—all that and much more. And yet it is the basic foundation of the religious life. It's the first and second commandments.

*Then God spoke all these words: I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on earth beneath that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them. (Exodus 20:1-5a)*

The first and second commandments are about worship, that is, it should be worship of God and God alone. It seems to me that this is so foundational, so basic that, it seems to me, we need to be very, very clear about this.

The question is not *if* we worship. The question is *what* we worship. We all have things to which we give our top allegiance. We each have our top priorities. To be human is to struggle with misplaced priorities. We all fall short at times. As individuals and as faith communities, we need continual reminding and encouragement to keep God number one.

When we worship God, we take an honest look at the world and ourselves. In worship we acknowledge and confess that we fall short, miss the mark, and are not perfect—as individuals, as a church, as a nation, and so on.

Jesus once said, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God. Only God is good.” And so worship acknowledges this. Only God is good. But that’s O.K. It’s more than O.K.; it’s fantastic. Because it is the love of God that heals us, makes us whole, comforts us, transforms us, and saves us and the entire universe! And so when we worship, this is what we are proclaiming—that God and only God is good, and that the unconditional acceptance and grace of God gives Life.

Over a decade ago I was the pastor of a church that had an American plan in its sanctuary, right next to the pulpit. And I suggested to that congregation that we should remove the flag from worship.

For me the problem is a blurring of the line between church and state, between God and country. First, even if it is unintentional, part of the message that can be sent is that this nation is favored or has a special status over other nations. Second, having a flag as a symbol of worship can unintentionally convey that the country is beyond reproach. It sends mixed messages about our ultimate allegiance. Some advocates of the flag in the sanctuary say that it simply states that we are grateful for the blessings of living in this country, that it is a reminder of the freedoms we enjoy. But symbols in worship, it seems to me, work on a different level than this. For many people, the flag in worship conveys much more. Country, family, friends, causes, are all fine, but they come in second to the ultimate allegiance, that is God. No country, no person, no movement is perfect, and all fall under the correction of God. Nothing is equal to God; everything is subordinate. And our use of symbols need to clearly demonstrate this and not point us to this mistaken perception. Theologians such as Reinhold Niebuhr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Paul Tillich, and Karl Barth all talked about the dangers of an uncritical nationalism. William Sloane Coffin said it well:

*There are three kinds of patriots, two bad, one good. The bad are the uncritical lovers and the loveless critics. Good patriots carry on a lover’s quarrel with their country, a reflection of God’s lover’s quarrel with all the world.*

It’s important to remember that the church’s confession, “Jesus is Lord” was actually a political statement and a direct challenge to supreme allegiance to both the empire and the emperor. Many of those early followers paid for their ultimate loyalty to Christ with their lives.

I remember telling that congregation:

*I love the flag and proudly fly it. Just not in worship. I love my country, just as I love my wife, my children, my mother and father. But I do not worship them. And it would be unfair to say that because I do not want to even appear to worship them that I do not love them. Worship is for God alone. And on that, it seems to me, we need to be absolutely clear.*

Friends, we need to reject Christian Nationalism, whether it be full-blown or in an incipient form. Because when we worship the nation we cannot question it, improve it or transform it. When we worship the nation we enshrine the status quo of white privilege, of inequality, of the power of wealth. As Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “The church should be the conscience of the nation, not the servant of the nation.”

We must keep the church and state separate. We must oppose the take-over of our faith by a political agenda. We must worship God alone and keep a critical distance, as we work for greater degrees of democracy, greater degrees of equality, greater degrees of economic justice.