



HOW CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM BETRAYS  
THE GOSPEL AND THREATENS THE CHURCH

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**ANDREW L. WHITEHEAD**

# **AMERICAN IDOLATRY**

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**BrazosPress**

*a division of Baker Publishing Group*  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Andrew Whitehead, *American Idolatry*  
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Published by Brazos Press  
a division of Baker Publishing Group  
Grand Rapids, Michigan  
www.brazospress.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Whitehead, Andrew L., author.

Title: American idolatry : how Christian nationalism betrays the gospel and threatens the church / Andrew L. Whitehead.

Description: Grand Rapids, Michigan : Brazos Press, a division of Baker Publishing Group, [2023] | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2022056548 | ISBN 9781587435768 (cloth) | ISBN 9781493441976 (ebook) | ISBN 9781493441983 (pdf)

Subjects: LCSH: Christianity and politics—United States—History—21st century. | Christianity and culture—United States—History—21st century. | Nationalism—Religious aspects—Christianity. | Nationalism—United States—History—21st century.

Classification: LCC BR526 .W52 2023 | DDC 277.308/3—dc23/eng/20230320  
LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2022056548>

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The author is represented by The Anderson Literary Agency, Inc.

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23 24 25 26 27 28 29      7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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# PREFACE

**I**F YOUR FAITH JOURNEY has been anything like mine, you've likely wrestled with some big and important questions. Over the last twenty years or so, here are some that have unsettled me personally:

- If our nation was built on Christian principles, why did our forebears treat Native Americans so viciously? Why are some committed to ignoring this history today?
- If Christian theology so profoundly shaped our national values of liberty, human rights, and full equality, why did even the most devout Christian citizens enslave Africans, ripping them from their land and destroying their lives and families? Why did our political leaders and the people who supported those leaders bar Black Americans from the full rights of citizenship for so long? Why do Black Americans continue to face hurdles today?
- If the United States is a Christian nation, a beacon of hope and democracy to the world, why do we often treat immigrants and refugees with such disdain and sometimes outright violence? Why don't we do more to help them?<sup>1</sup>

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- Can we be faithful Christians and critique the United States?
- Can we be faithful Christians and patriotic?
- Can we be faithful Christians and celebrate this country and our citizenship?
- Can we be grateful for this country without baptizing and rationalizing away all the evil perpetrated in its name?

These are difficult questions. Perhaps some of them look familiar. Perhaps some of them do not. If you've wrestled with at least one of these, then we're likely on the same journey. We're trying our best to understand how our faith tradition and our place in this world should interact.

These questions are difficult because they highlight how closely intertwined the Christian faith is with American national identity for many Christians in the United States. And when the dictates of the Christian faith seem to so clearly oppose the actions of the nation, profound dissonance starts to reverberate.

In my own journey—much of which is reflected in this book—I've come to believe that in order to faithfully follow the teachings and example of Jesus of Nazareth, I must work to disentangle Christianity from Christian nationalism. The two cannot coexist. I must serve one or the other.

Therefore, the first goal of this book is to make clear that Christian nationalism—a cultural framework asserting that all civic life in the United States should be organized according to a particular form of conservative Christianity—betrays the example set by Jesus in the Gospels. Christian nationalism leads us to practice various forms of idolatry, revering a god or gods other than Jesus, trusting in them for protection and provision.<sup>2</sup> I hope this book will encourage continued discussions within American Christian circles about what Christian nationalism threatens and why it's so important for us to confront this idolatrous ideology. It can be a difficult conversation but is worth having.

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What I've also found on this journey is that I am not alone. I've interacted with hundreds of Christians like me who are confronting Christian nationalism in their daily lives, congregations, and communities. I'm confident many more exist. Highlighting some of these people and organizations is the second goal of this book. We need to see how we can do the work of disentangling Christianity from Christian nationalism by following those already on this path. I draw on the wonderful work and writing of fellow pilgrims, and I encourage you to seek out their work, support their efforts, and follow their lead, as I am. So this book is a continuing word, not the first and not the last.

I also want to clearly identify what this book is *not*. This book is not a scholarly treatment of Christian nationalism. My colleague and friend Samuel Perry and I have already addressed this in *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States*. A related work is *The Flag and the Cross* by Philip Gorski and Samuel Perry. I continue to publish academic journal articles on this topic, and interested readers can see those studies for more in-depth details about our research.

Likewise, this book does not directly examine the threat that Christian nationalism poses to democracy in the United States—although that threat is very real. Fellow scholars document how Christian nationalism is closely associated with desires to restrict access to the voting process, a rejection that voter suppression exists, and a comfort with engaging in violence to overturn an election outcome deemed disagreeable.<sup>3</sup> Christians can and should care about the health of our democracy. I aim to help fellow Christians confront and oppose Christian nationalism, and I hope it will spill over into their views toward democracy and the right of *everyone* to have an equal say in how we organize our society.

This book does not argue that Christians should abstain from politics. Exiting the public square is not the avenue through which we confront Christian nationalism.<sup>4</sup> Standing against Christian nationalism is not the same as saying that Christians

(from anywhere on the theological or political spectrum) should stay out of politics. Christians can and should participate in the political process in their communities, states, and nations. The question concerns *how* we are active and to what ends. Christian nationalism points us in one direction. I'm convinced Christians should seek another path.

This book does not argue that Christians should reject patriotism. Christian nationalism and Christian patriotism are different things. Christians can love their home country, can steward its vast resources with care, and can sacrifice to make the lives of their neighbors better. Christians can and should celebrate the good elements of their country's history and makeup while striving to make things better. Again, the question concerns *how* we define and express patriotism and to what ends.

I wrote this book with a particular audience in mind: fellow Christians. Throughout, I will make normative and moral claims flowing from my identification as a Christian. While I ground my beliefs about the harmful nature of Christian nationalism in empirical, scholarly research, this book is also deeply informed by my faith and by historical Christian teachings, the life of Jesus, and the Bible.

This book does not delve into some topics as deeply (or even at all) as some might expect. While I offer my expertise and thoughts as a social scientist as to how we can and should confront Christian nationalism, I look forward to hearing and continuing to learn from experts in fields other than social science. The only way we make headway is by doing it together, in community.

I must also note that I'm a white, able-bodied, Protestant Christian man born in the United States. My voice and the voices of people who look like me have always been central in these conversations. While I am one of a handful of academic experts on Christian nationalism in the United States, I advocate for raising up and listening to people who live and lead on the margins, those historically silenced and minimized. I firmly believe this is where



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Jesus most often located himself. Therefore, throughout this book I cite the thinkers and writers who are usually on the margins in the religious tradition of my youth. I've come to find these voices later in my journey. I hope you find, buy, and read their books and learn as much as I continue to.

I was raised in an evangelical Christian community and attended largely white evangelical congregations the majority of my life. I made a personal decision to follow Jesus as a young child and then again as a freshman in high school while on a spring-break service trip with my youth group. I was baptized at a Sunday-evening service out in a fellow congregant's pond. I was in church Sunday mornings and Sunday and Wednesday evenings. The church was a shelter for me during some trying times as an adolescent. I knew I was accepted, loved, and welcome.

I've memorized scores of Bible verses, even a whole book. In college I attended and led Bible studies and participated in the Navigators (a parachurch organization like Cru) in addition to participating in a church home on Sundays. This world made me, and I can speak with an insider's perspective on its strengths and weaknesses. I have experienced both firsthand. My faith, albeit different today than twenty years ago, is still a fundamental aspect of who I am. I continue to try my best to follow Jesus, who at the beginning of his ministry told us he came "to proclaim good news to the poor" and "to proclaim freedom for the prisoners, and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18-19). I'm compelled by the great mystery of God, as we read in Colossians 2:2, which is Christ in us, the hope of glory. I will share more of this journey in the coming pages.

I write this book as a sociologist and a Christian. I approach this subject with both identities in hand, writing to fellow Christians to show that Christian nationalism is opposed to the way of Christ. I entertain no fantasies of convincing everyone to see things exactly the way I do. But I hope you will genuinely grapple

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with whether and how the particular Christian expression and community of believers you most identify with embrace aspects of Christian nationalism. We are all on a journey, and I continue on mine. I have not arrived. I have more to learn.

Finally, in the chapters that follow, I share how American Christians are faithfully confronting Christian nationalism. It is not just a “progressive” or “liberal” Christian activity. Pastors, teachers, and lay Christians like me across a wide spectrum of theological views recognize how aspects of Christian nationalism are contrary to the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. May their stories inspire us to confront and oppose the idols of Christian nationalism.

This book aims to be a resource that you can quickly turn to as we together do the work of disentangling Christianity from Christian nationalism.

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

**I** LOVE WRITING ACKNOWLEDGMENTS. It reminds me I am not alone when so often this work can feel that way. While I am responsible for any mistakes or errors in this text, and what I wrote does not necessarily reflect the views of anyone mentioned here, so many people have shaped and formed my thinking and supported me through this process.

First, thank you to the entire Brazos team, including Paula Gibson, Erin Smith, Kara Day, Katie Pfozter, Julie Zahm, and especially to Katelyn Beaty, for reaching out to me with an idea and being there from the beginning to the end.

Thank you to Giles Anderson for representing me and helping round out the project proposal. I am grateful to Brian Steensland, Phil Goff, Nate Wynne, Lauren Schmidt, IUPUI, and the Center for the Study of Religion and American Culture. Thank you to Robby Jones, Kelsy Burke, Dan Winchester, Jeff Guhin, Ruth Braunstein, Gerardo Martí, Phil Gorski, and the RRJN for the camaraderie. Michael Trexler and Jeff Ballard were also there offering support and encouragement from start to finish, through ups and downs.

## *Acknowledgments*

I am grateful to my lifelong pals: Keith Fishburn, Chunny Lechlitner, Ben Myers, and David Cramer. You guys lift me up. I give credit to Reese Roper for the closing line of this book.

Many thanks to those who offered feedback at the proposal stage or on portions of the book: Sam Perry, Kristin Kobes Du Mez, Beth Allison Barr, David Cramer, Danté Stewart, Jeff Ballard, Drew Strait, Amy Edmonds, Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, and Andrea Cramer. Rob Saler was there from beginning to end and never hesitated to read and reread chapters. I'm grateful to Joseph Baker, who at one of my lowest points demanded (perhaps even lightly threatened) I send him what I had, and he read every single word.

Many thanks to those who allowed me to interview them and whose stories and perspectives I share: Scott Coley, Amanda Tyler, Andrea Cramer, Amar Peterman, Trevor Bechtel, and Asma Uddin.

I also want to acknowledge that the institution where I work in Indianapolis sits on land that once belonged to scores of African American families who were forced from their homes. The community where I live sits on the land of the Kiikaapoi, Kaskaskia, and Myaamia nations. The histories of where we find ourselves matter.

Thank you to my parents, who set me on the path to where you find me today, playing a role in helping me pierce through the veil at various times. I am also grateful to my in-laws for their unwavering support of our family—with all the challenges that entails—and for their unconditional love no matter where my work leads me.

To my kiddos: Thank you, Joel and Theo, for your giggles, smiles, cuddles, hugs, and hidden treasures. Thank you, Natalie, for your irresistible spirit and bringing so much light to our lives.

Finally, to Kelly: You are my best friend. You are my greatest strength. You are everything I ever hoped for and so much more than I ever deserve. Thank you for choosing me every single day.



# A HOLLOW AND DECEPTIVE PHILOSOPHY

See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ.

—Colossians 2:8

**G**ROWING UP IN CHRISTIAN SPACES, I routinely heard that one of the greatest threats to Christianity in the United States was secularism. If you weren't careful, it would draw you away from God. Secularism—defined for us as a philosophical system that rejects religion, or at least rejects its place in the public square—wanted to take prayer and the Bible out of public schools. The Supreme Court and “activist justices” (which always meant the liberal ones) were committed to moving our country away from its Christian roots.

Democrats threatened our faith too. They advocated for abortion, accepted homosexuality, and wanted to take what we rightfully earned and redistribute it. I was told to detest both communism and socialism, as those economic and political systems were godless, while capitalism was the route to ensuring a fair, free, and prosperous nation blessed by God.

I heard that some of the greatest threats to Christianity in the United States were divorce, feminism, and the absence of strong fathers. Families needed a mom at home and a dad at work in order to flourish. Moreover, our nation needed strong families or else it would go the way of ancient Rome. Gay marriage and homosexuality were a clear threat to the family, one that we were expected to oppose.

We generally ignored immigrants and refugees. They likely brought false religions like Islam, Hinduism, or Buddhism to our shores. We should go to other countries to evangelize, and we should be kind to the few foreign families who might live among us. But we rarely had to think about it as few lived in our communities.

But what if the greatest threat to Christianity in the United States was never from these or any other outside sources? What if the greatest threat to Christianity in the United States came from within, a wolf in sheep's clothing, something familiar enough to evade detection so most would not even realize the threat? What if, for many American Christians, confronting this threat felt akin to opposing Christianity itself?

What if all along the greatest threat to Christianity in the United States was white Christian nationalism? (I explain the racial component of Christian nationalism in detail in chap. 2.)

## **My Story**

I was born and raised in a small, rural, close-knit community in the Midwest. We had one stoplight, two if you counted the blinking red light on the way out of town. Farming and manufacturing

were the primary drivers of the local economy. It was blue collar through and through.

Over the past forty years, the population has hovered around sixteen hundred people, served by no less than fourteen Christian congregations in a five-mile radius. Families, faith, and American pride were paramount. If it was Sunday morning, or Wednesday or Sunday evening, you were in church, worshiping beside neighbors who might also be your teacher, florist, electrician, or insurance agent.

For most residents, this resulted in a strong sense of community. You knew everyone and they all knew you. If a family was in need, you took them a meal. If someone was laid off, you poked around to see where work might be available. It was here that I first learned how to love and sacrifice for my neighbor. I am confident that even now if I was in need, those who knew me when I was growing up would do all they could to help.

The congregations in this community instilled in me a love for Jesus, the Bible, and the Christian church. It was in this context that I learned what it meant to be a Christian: accept the correct beliefs, care for those around you, stand up for what is right, and ensure that our Christian convictions prevail in the public square. Doing these things made you a good Christian and a good American. The American flag and the Christian flag at the front of the sanctuary symbolized this relationship. To be one was to be the other.

Our community maintained a number of beliefs to be obviously true:

- Families are the cornerstone of society, and when the family breaks down, society breaks down. Families are made up of a dad, a mom, and kids. Children obey parents, and fathers are the head of the household.
- Christianity always works for the good throughout society. The United States is great, and that is due to its Christian heritage.

- Christians should categorically oppose abortion, homosexuality, and divorce because the Bible clearly teaches each is wrong. The extent to which we allow each to exist in our society will erode the greatness of our nation, ensuring its collapse.
- War might be terrible, but the United States has always fought for good, helping achieve God's will for the world. Therefore, war is sometimes necessary, even godly.
- Secular society will destroy your faith, so you must be careful what you read, listen to, or interact with outside church.

These and other beliefs suffused my worldview. However, despite the taken-for-granted nature of these beliefs, there were moments when cracks and inconsistencies became visible.

One such instance was when I was discussing war with a youth pastor of the evangelical megachurch I attended in high school. In my mind, there was little to no dissonance between the dictates of the Christian faith and the righteousness of fighting to defend our country, which would include killing those on the other side. He asked me, "But what if the person we kill on the other side is a fellow Christian? What then? Did we just send that person to heaven? Is that what God would want for us?"

I was taken aback. I could not stop thinking about the implications of his questions. It was uncomfortable to think about the tension between my identities as an American and as a Christian. I began to see how my categories of "us" and "them" were influenced by much more than my faith. It was awkward to contemplate how being faithful to one identity might lead to being unfaithful to the other. Up until then, they had perfectly complemented each other.

Another instance was brought on by the music I listened to while in high school youth group. One of the bands my friends and I loved had several songs that questioned the narratives about



the righteousness of the United States. For instance, in one song they sang about how the budding nation had slaughtered Native Americans in order to manifest its “destiny.”<sup>1</sup> This was quite different from the mainstream contemporary Christian artists I listened to back in the 1990s and early 2000s.

These and other experiences began to raise questions in my mind. Can Christians, in good conscience, fight and kill other Christians if the nations we were born into by historical accident demand we do so? How could Christians send missionaries and soldiers to the same country? How could a loving God make room for Christians in a new land through genocide? I would try to imagine Jesus—who I was taught was the perfect representation of God—acting in these ways. I just couldn’t see it.

These questions found additional purchase during my first semester of undergraduate education at Purdue University. I was in a survey course of American history from the colonies up until Reconstruction. Frank Lambert, a leading historian on religion and the founding period, taught the course.<sup>2</sup>

I distinctly remember the day, when discussing various founding fathers, Dr. Lambert said that while some were religious in their own right—many were deists, believing in a Creator God, who could be understood via reason—the founding fathers were certainly not “evangelical Christians.”

In this moment, a key in my mind slid into place, cleanly releasing a previously locked door. In one instant, an expert in early US religious history justified the questions I had about the relationship between Christianity and the founding period. The present and past had a much more complicated and circuitous relationship. Things were not so cut and dried.

Nevertheless, this moment was also disorienting. The history I grew up hearing was not entirely accurate. The implications of this revelation began to slowly bubble to the surface. Because so much of the public role of Christianity in the United States relied on a narrative about the nation and its founders being essentially

evangelical, I had to entirely rethink how my faith should work itself out in public life.

It was at this point that I began to recognize my enduring interest in the relationship between religion and culture, particularly in the United States. One year after I graduated from Purdue, I realized that I wanted to be a student forever. Off to graduate school I went with the desire to study the only thing that ever consistently captivated my attention: how religion both influences and is influenced by culture.

In my first year of graduate school, I read Greg Boyd's book *The Myth of a Christian Nation*. This work crystallized so much of what I had been considering for years. It delineated the differences between the kingdom of God and the kingdoms of this world. It pointed out how the temptation to exercise power *over* others has consistently led Christians to commit all sorts of atrocities. Rather than seek power over others, Boyd argues, Christians should imitate Christ and his "upside-down" kingdom, where power *under* others is the way.<sup>3</sup> It felt like I could finally put my finger on why culture-war Christianity felt so hollow and devoid of the fruit of the Spirit. Christianity was not about culture-warring or dominating the public square. Thanks to Boyd and a new understanding of historically marginalized communities, I began to see how Christians are called to serve, give of themselves, and leverage their power and privilege for the common good.

I found this to be a much more beautiful vision of the gospel. This vision of the kingdom captivated me. My faith would never be the same. Instead of fear and control, this gospel was about freedom and liberation.

While the faith of my youth was being refined and reformed to align with a Jesus who came not to be served but to serve (Matt. 20:28), I was learning the methodological and theoretical tools of my craft, sociology. As luck (or providence?) would have it, the graduate program I attended consistently collected high-quality quantitative data on the American public.

In two early surveys, they asked a series of questions about how Americans view the relationship between Christianity, religion, the federal government, and civic life in the United States. Following the work of others, I used these questions to create a scale that measured Christian nationalism. I sent an email to a new colleague with whom I had just written another paper: Sam Perry.

We began working on several studies making the case that above and beyond the usual measures of religious belief, belonging, and behavior, as well as political party and ideology, Christian nationalism tells us something unique about how Americans see the world. We soon found that Christian nationalism—which I define briefly below and more fully in the next chapter—was indeed one of the strongest predictors of Americans’ attitudes toward several social issues. One paper explored attitudes toward same-sex unions (this was back before *Obergefell v. Hodges* legalized same-sex marriage across the United States). Perhaps more transformative for us was our paper showing that greater acceptance of Christian nationalism predicted much more negative views of interracial marriage. Again, Christian nationalism was consistently one of the most powerful predictors.

It made us wonder: Why are the questions we use to measure Christian nationalism, which make no mention of race, so powerfully related to white Americans’ attitudes toward interracial marriage? What is it about holding “Christian nation” views that makes white Americans more likely to believe marrying Black Americans is wrong? We started to realize that we were onto something much bigger than anticipated.

Not long after these papers appeared in peer-reviewed journals, I applied for funding to place these questions about Christian nationalism on another national survey. I decided then that I would use this data to write a book on Christian nationalism. Scores of historians had examined the Christian nation narrative and mythology. Several journalists had written books on Christian nationalists in the United States. However, there was no book

examining Christian nationalism with high-quality empirical data of the American public.

Sam agreed to collaborate with me, and our work culminated in *Taking America Back for God*, published in 2020. While writing the book, along with the many peer-reviewed articles on Christian nationalism we wrote together and with several close colleagues, I became more and more convinced of the detrimental influence Christian nationalism has on multiple aspects of American life. I became even more convinced that Christian nationalism was detrimental to the church. Christian nationalism makes American Christians less Christlike. As we write near the end of our book, “The desperate quest for power inherent in Christian nationalist ideology is antithetical to Jesus’ message. At its core, Christian nationalism is a hollow and deceptive philosophy that depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world, rather than on Christ.”<sup>4</sup>

I share this to show how my desire to confront Christian nationalism flows from two parts of my history and identity. First, I am a follower of Christ. Born and raised in Christianity, I was taught to take seriously the commands of Jesus and the gospel message. Second, I am a social scientist. I am trained in how to gather and analyze high-quality data to make sense of our social world. Both parts of my identity compel me to seek after and to stand for truth, no matter what. Both parts of my identity have led me to the same conclusion: Christian nationalism betrays the gospel and is a threat to the Christian church in the United States.

It is from this perspective that I write this book. I want to make clear to my fellow white American Christians how much Christian nationalism threatens our faith—not only our individual expressions of it but also our organizations and institutions. It threatens our capacity to love our brothers and sisters in Christ who are minorities. It threatens our capacity to love and serve our brothers and sisters in Christ from countries around the world. It threatens our capacity to love and serve fellow bearers of God’s image at

home and abroad who don't share our faith at all. And it threatens how our organizations function, causing them to reproduce inequality and further harm the marginalized.

I am convinced that Christian nationalism makes us bad Christians.

### **What Is the Gospel?**

In recent years, some of us have seen the fruit of Christian nationalism in our churches and among our friends. We are rightly troubled and wonder, *Has it always been this way?* We no longer recognize our faith tradition. Some of us leave. Others of us stay but grieve the current state of affairs. We try to imagine a different future in which our collective example to those outside the faith is one that attracts rather than repels.

Based on both my personal and my professional experiences grappling with Christian nationalism, this book seeks first to demonstrate how several central aspects of white Christian nationalism are antithetical to the gospel. Each chapter represents a distinctive lens through which we can see how white Christian nationalism betrays the life and teachings of Jesus—the gospel—as found in the Bible.

What is the gospel? Growing up, I would have defined it as recognizing that (1) I was born a sinner separated from God, (2) the wages of sin were death and eternal punishment, (3) I was in need of Jesus's sacrifice on the cross to pay my debt, (4) accepting by faith Jesus's sacrifice would save me from the punishment I deserved and promise me eternal life, and (5) I was now at peace with God in a personal relationship with Jesus. This may look familiar to you or reflect your current definition of the gospel.

Today, I believe this picture of the gospel is an important foundation yet incomplete.<sup>5</sup> It reflects only one aspect of the gospel, what my philosopher friend Scott Coley suggests we might label the *doxastic gospel*. Think of the doxastic gospel as a set of

theological claims that we either believe or do not believe, such as the death and resurrection of Jesus, the nature of atonement, and the work of the church.<sup>6</sup> The doxastic gospel focuses mainly on me and my relationship with God and whether I believe the right things. However, as theologian Kat Armas says, “Spirituality includes all the dimensions of human, personal, and societal living that combine to make human life human—the measure of the fullness of God’s gift.”<sup>7</sup> When we apply the gospel only to our personal lives and cherry-pick Bible verses in support, we miss the clear theme of justice throughout the Bible and ignore the broader work of God in the world.

We must embrace the second aspect of the gospel, what we can label the *practical gospel*—practices that flow from the doxastic gospel, such as loving one’s neighbor, seeking justice for the oppressed, and caring for orphans and widows.<sup>8</sup> Scott pointed out to me how throughout the Bible the doxastic gospel is inextricable from the practical gospel. The book of James and the Beatitudes are two clear examples of this. We can also see it in Jesus’s first public message.

Consider his claim in Luke 4:16–21. In a synagogue on the Sabbath, he stands up and reads a passage from Isaiah:

The Spirit of the Lord is on me,  
because he has anointed me  
to proclaim good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners  
and recovery of sight for the blind,  
to set the oppressed free,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor. (4:18–19)

In his first public sermon, Jesus does not emphasize the forgiveness of *my* individual sins. Instead, he points to how his project is liberating all of humanity from *our* enslavement to sin, including the ways sin is baked into the structures of our common life and harms our neighbors. We, like Jesus, cannot read the words

of Isaiah and other prophets honestly and come away thinking God cares more about our personal salvation than how we treat other people, including through the social structures that oppress them.<sup>9</sup> “The good news was both about the *coming* of the Kingdom of God and the *character* of that Kingdom,” writes Lisa Sharon Harper.<sup>10</sup>

The definition of the gospel from my youth reduced Christianity to the doxastic gospel, ignoring the practical aspect of it. This sheds light on why so often the gospel amounted only to person-to-person evangelism, getting people “saved.” This gospel limited the work of Jesus to each person’s spiritual condition. It had little to say about the political and social realities of our fellow humans. I began to ask myself, “What if I preached this gospel to someone enslaved in 1845 or someone being forcibly removed from their land in 1832? Would they receive this promise of future salvation that says nothing about their current suffering as ‘good news?’”

We all are to join God in the work of renewal that entails the flourishing of all, likewise proclaiming the Year of Jubilee that Jesus inaugurated that day in Nazareth. Jesus came “that they may have life, and have it to the full” (John 10:10)—not just spiritually but in our bodies, our relationships, and the social systems that organize our collective lives. “God’s redemptive plan throughout history has consistently concerned all of creation, and he repeatedly admonishes his people to seek the flourishing of the whole world.”<sup>11</sup>

Severing these two important aspects of the gospel obscures how Jesus proclaimed a fundamental realignment of the power structures of society *in addition* to personal spiritual salvation. It also ignores how Jesus understood his ministry and rescue mission to all of humanity as beginning here and now. Jesus was inaugurating God’s kingdom on earth, and this held political and social implications, for systems of power *and* individuals. Those listening to Jesus in the shadow of oppressive empire understood

this. Those marginalized in our society hear Jesus in this same way.

Indeed, much of the Christian tradition, from the time of the early church forward, has stressed that salvation itself is a communal reality that encompasses all of creation. Thus, if salvation is understood as a personal possession with no implications for how I fight the evil that hurts my neighbor, then not only is that a misunderstanding of the teaching of Jesus but it is also a misunderstanding of the nature and scope of salvation itself.<sup>12</sup>

And it is the broad acceptance of an incomplete view of the gospel—the doxastic aspect that focuses on individual salvation alone—that hinders many American Christians from seeing how Christian nationalism betrays the life and teachings of Jesus in two important areas: racial inequality and xenophobia.<sup>13</sup> In these two areas, white American Christians tend to ignore the practical aspect of the gospel, including justice for the oppressed, thinking that as long as we believe the correct theological claims and encourage others to embrace those theological claims as well that we are doing all we need to do. Likely, this is because we are *already* free. We *already* enjoy so much in the here and now. What use do those of us who are white American Christians have for overturning systems of oppression when we have long benefited from those very systems?

Jesus realigned how we are to view power and called for a people whom the world would know by their sacrificial love—a love that leads to the disruption of oppression in the world. Part of our loving the poor, the widow, the orphan, and the immigrant is recognizing our own complicity in the systems of injustice that create and perpetuate their marginalization and suffering.<sup>14</sup> This sacrificial love participates in God's ongoing mission of disrupting sin and its destructive effects on human relationships. Christians are to leverage their power, position, and privilege to the benefit of all rather than for their own self-interest.<sup>15</sup> In the dozens of studies others and I have conducted in recent years, we find repeatedly



that the practical fruit of Christian nationalism is certainly not love. It is power, control, domination, fear, and violence.

Once we see the gospel as good news for the present, good news for the marginalized, good news for the prisoner, good news for the poor, good news for the blind, and good news for the oppressed, we can begin to take the evidence that social science hands us about Christian nationalism and recognize this ideology as limiting—and in many cases outright opposing—the work Jesus claimed he came to do and commanded us to do likewise (Matt. 22:37–40).

Comparing this gospel with the evidence I will share is an important step in faithfully diagnosing and understanding the problems the American Christian church faces. It will show how Christian nationalism betrays the gospel. We have to look straight into the mirror and not try to hide or diminish the imperfections we see. Only then can we begin to imagine something new. Part of this work is recognizing that the God we worship has no particular interest in the greatness of the United States. The survival of any one nation over another is not paramount. The kingdom of God needs no global superpower in order to flourish. Rather, as Jesus’s parable teaches, it spreads and grows from the smallest of seeds, soon providing shade to the whole garden (Mark 4:30–32).

Again, recognizing that human flourishing in the kingdom of God and in the United States (or any other nation) are not synonymous does not mean that Christians should not invest in the flourishing of a nation and its people. We can work toward peace, justice, and care for all who live and work within the boundaries of our home country. We can collaborate with God and those around us to create a more loving and liberating country for all our neighbors. We can seek shalom—“a vision of a Kingdom that provides for all,” in Harper’s words.<sup>16</sup>

Therefore, it is not a question of *if* we should engage in work to benefit those around us. It is a question of how broadly we define the “us” who benefits. The gospel can and does *empower*

us to enter more deeply into our neighbors' needs, serving them out of gratitude to God. We can advocate for "coercive" policies—like the Voting Rights Act—that benefit all our neighbors. To do so faithfully in a pluralistic society, however, requires us to build coalitions for the public good, collaborating and cooperating with our neighbors no matter how different we perceive them to be. We will need to practice humility, vulnerability, and empathy in a way that befits the gospel.

### **Where Are We Going?**

To help us imagine a future full of possibility, in later chapters I share stories and examples of American Christians who are currently confronting white Christian nationalism as it relates to their congregations and communities. These Christians are seeking shalom among all their fellow citizens, not just those fellow citizens who they might feel are most "deserving." As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. showed us, "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny."<sup>17</sup> Injustice experienced by one community is injustice experienced by all. The stories and examples will model how Christians can be committed to all. We can expand the "us" to all of humanity, so that if particular policies that harm minority communities are "being implemented in the name of Jesus, we have a particular obligation to show up, resist, and demonstrate a better way."<sup>18</sup>

We will learn about a group of Christians who collaborate with secular Americans to advocate for the right of all people to practice or not practice religion without governmental interference. We will discuss Christians who practice empathy to confront fear that so easily turns us against one another. We will hear from a congregation who took a step of faith with their own reparative act, collecting and donating funds to give away to their Black sisters and brothers. I will share the story of a friend from my own youth group who recognized that "no friendship is apolitical" and

decided to enter into the challenges facing immigrants and refugees to ensure that they are truly welcomed to her community. These examples help us see what is possible. Life is springing from the cracks in the concrete.

But first, we will begin the journey defining Christian nationalism and describing its depth and breadth across American society (chap. 2). In short, white Christian nationalism is a cultural framework asserting that civic life in the United States should be organized according to a particular form of conservative Christianity. Beyond any theological or religious beliefs associated with Christianity, white Christian nationalism brings with it a host of cultural assumptions, particularly a moral traditionalism predicated on maintaining social hierarchies, a comfort with (the “right kind” of ) authoritarian social control that includes the threat and use of violence, and a desire for strict ethno-racial boundaries designating who can fully participate in American civic life. As we’ll explore later, it centers and privileges the white Christian experience because it essentially teaches that this country was founded by white, conservative Christian men for the benefit of white, conservative Christian citizens.<sup>19</sup>

After defining Christian nationalism, we will work through examples of where and how it exists in our congregations, personal lives, and communities. We will touch on whether we can oppose Christian nationalism and still be patriotic Christians and how Christians can commit to a common good that does not favor one group over another.

Then we’ll turn to three distinctive idols of white Christian nationalism (chaps. 3–5). I like how Kaitlyn Schiess defines idolatry in *The Liturgy of Politics* as “capitulation to a different story and set of values. Idols make promises of protection and provision, and they require allegiance.”<sup>20</sup> Bible scholar Drew Strait tells us that idols “co-opt our theological imaginations” and “distort our knowledge of God and neighbor,” leading us to betray our loyalty to Jesus and the gospel.<sup>21</sup> Power, fear, and violence are not the

only idols of Christian nationalism, but they are the three most powerful. We'll see how they promise protection and provision but only deliver on those promises by forcing us to exploit our neighbors.

First, Christian nationalism is wholly obsessed with power used to benefit "us." It seeks to create hierarchies in which some deserve (on the basis of "the will of God") to be at the top with unfettered access to power and privilege, while others exist in lower sections of the social hierarchy. We will explore how Jesus related to power throughout the Gospels. We will examine fellow Christians who are thinking deeply about power and how to wield it faithfully. And we will look at how Christians can confront Christian nationalism through defending true religious liberty and siding with those marginalized across American society.

Second, Christian nationalism is intimately intertwined with fear and a sense of threat. It constantly pushes us to see the world in terms of "us" versus "them," with "them" always threatening "our" power and privilege. It operates from a scarcity mindset, that there is not enough for all of us to experience abundance. Those wielding power to selfishly benefit white Christians have for decades traded in fear alongside Christian nationalism to great effect. They mobilized countless Americans to particular ends, even when those ends ultimately cost the lives and livelihoods of our fellow Americans from minority populations. However, should Christians live in fear? What if Christians did not buy into fear, especially the fear of losing what they see as rightfully theirs? What if Christians could reject us-versus-them thinking, which encourages us to see other humans as enemies to subdue and hold in contempt? What if we instead embraced the gospel highlighting the good news of abundant life for all, in the here and now, where we can empathize with our neighbors instead of demonizing them? The message of this gospel dispels the group-level fears of white Christian nationalism centered on loss of power, privilege, and prosperity.

Third, Christian nationalism is completely comfortable with, and at times demands, the use of violence. Because the protection of “our” power and privilege from “them” is paramount, all means of achieving such ends are acceptable. History demonstrates how violence is the result of quests for power that are based on fear, especially when power and fear revolve around hierarchical relationships predicated on “us” versus “them.” Ultimately, the use of violence signals a distrust of the work of God in the world and seeing the image of God in all people.

Throughout our nation’s history, these three idols have resulted in horrific violence, expressing themselves through creating and maintaining “proper” hierarchies between various groups and the mistreatment of those groups. There are many examples of this dynamic at work, including the subjugation of women. For centuries, women have been victims of the idols of power, fear, and violence intertwined with white Christian nationalism. Because the “Christian” content of Christian nationalism tends to revere cultural traditionalism in all its forms, social science consistently demonstrates that calls for a “more Christian nation” are essentially calls for a more patriarchal social and political system within our families, congregations, and political institutions. Unchecked sexual and psychological abuse, limitations on women’s autonomy, and the silencing of women’s voices and gifts are just a few of the ways white Christian nationalism and its idols have harmed women. I have learned so much from books like *Jesus and John Wayne* by Kristin Kobes Du Mez and *The Making of Biblical Womanhood* by Beth Allison Barr and encourage you to wrestle with these histories and their implications.

In this book, however, I will focus on how the three idols of Christian nationalism perpetuate racism and xenophobia. One avenue through which we have identified the “other” for centuries is the construction of racial categories. White Christian nationalism is closely intertwined with systemic racism. Rather than minimizing this connection, white American Christians can

acknowledge our complicity in upholding the systems that maintain racial inequality. While we personally may not have played a role in setting up these systems, we do participate in and benefit from them. Listening to our brothers and sisters from minority racial and ethnic groups will help us find a new path toward more faithful Christian love.

Alongside fear of racial and ethnic minorities, fear and antipathy toward immigrants, refugees, and pretty much anyone not a natural-born citizen is another harmful result of the three idols of white Christian nationalism. The “other” includes anyone not “born here.” Why do we discriminate against other children of God just because they were not born here by historical accident? Even if we assented to the idea that God chooses the nationality of every human being, how does that excuse us for selfishly holding on to the blessings and comforts of being an American citizen?

If God truly chose some of us to be Americans and enjoy living in arguably the wealthiest country in the history of the world, shouldn't we be trembling with fear that we might cruelly withhold sharing our undeserved blessing and grace with others? Consider the parable of the unmerciful servant (Matt. 18:21–35). Blessed with a gift of mercy he could never repay, he fails to extend even a shred of such blessing to those in need. What if American Christians applied this lesson to ensure that we do not likewise hoard blessings at the expense of others?

But instead of welcoming and serving the alien and stranger, Christian nationalism encourages an outright rejection of these people. Throughout the Christian scriptures and especially in the teachings of Jesus, Christians are commanded to do the exact opposite.

As we will see throughout each chapter, American Christians are confronting the idols of Christian nationalism in various ways. We can join in this work both individually and in our communities. While we can seek to renew our individual hearts and

minds, we cannot stop there. Indeed, a key insight from my field of sociology is that focusing solely on changing individual hearts and minds will only perpetuate the current situation. We will need to commit to changing how our congregations, denominations, other faith organizations, and the political systems in our states and nation—the social groups and systems of which we are all a part—operate. Only then can we hope to remake American Christianity.

We can acknowledge and grieve the harm that we and our organizations have done as we have chased unfettered power to enact a particular vision of the world on those around us. We can begin to recognize that Christians were *never* called to “win” their culture for Christ (whatever that might mean) or vote only for Christians like them to hold political office. Jesus did not call us to advance any particular kingdom of this world by selfishly wielding power. Jesus did not call us to win the culture and lord our privilege and influence over others. Our commitment to these pursuits has made us unloving neighbors.

Those outside Christianity, as well as those who have left, clearly recognize we sometimes treat Jesus as a mascot, useful only for baptizing our efforts to (re)make American society as we see fit by protecting and increasing our power and privilege. We claim that by increasing our privilege and selfishly employing our power, we will win more to the faith.

The project to win the culture for Jesus has backfired. Consider how the latest iteration of white Christian nationalism born out of the culture wars—from the rise of the Christian Right in the late 1970s until today<sup>22</sup>—has been completely ineffective in countering the numerical decline of American Christianity in the face of broader trends of secularization happening in the West. Consider the following:

- More Americans today affiliate with no religion at all than with any Christian religious tradition.

- The rates of disaffiliation show no signs of slowing; over 10 percent more Americans have disaffiliated from religion in the last decade alone.
- Young people are disaffiliating or never affiliating at higher rates than previous generations.
- From 2017 to 2021, 12 percent more Americans reported believing that “conservative Christians” want to do them physical harm.<sup>23</sup>

Gaining and selfishly employing political power has *not* served to bring more Americans into the Christian fold. Study after study demonstrates that one effect of the culture-warring of the Christian Right was to actively push people out of the Christian tradition. The following chapters highlight various aspects of the history of the Christian Right in relation to white Christian nationalism and the idols of power, fear, and violence.

The result of the Christian Right’s commitment to culture-warring was that while we were trying to convince those outside the church that we loved them, our commitment to white Christian nationalism ensured that they perceived that narrative as a lie. The same trends continue today. More and more Americans are leaving the Christian faith, and fewer and fewer have any desire to return or come for the first time at all.

In our effort to retain what we thought was a Christian nation, we have succeeded in pushing more Americans away from the faith. In our effort to ensure that our society is structured according to “God’s laws,” we have only convinced many Americans that we care more about achieving our vision for the country—which looks a lot like taking care of ourselves and our comfort—than loving and sacrificing for “the least of these” (Matt 25:40).

Following Jesus necessarily means we confront the various idols of Christian nationalism. White American Christians have too easily idolized power, fear, and violence. Each stands in con-



trast to the example set by Jesus. The longer American Christians actively embrace or tolerate white Christian nationalism, the greater the likelihood that our witness will continue to suffer and become effectively naught, if it isn't so already.

### **When Do We Begin?**

Historian Jemar Tisby, in his book *The Color of Compromise*, notes that history is contingent.<sup>24</sup> By this he means that people and organizations in our collective past made particular decisions at particular moments that resulted in where we find ourselves at present. By extension, had they made *different* decisions, Tisby notes—with no small measure of hope—we could well have inherited a very different world. He encourages us to arm ourselves with this knowledge to build a different world for tomorrow. Our decisions today matter and can have a broad impact, for good or ill.

The same is true as we seek to confront Christian nationalism. We can help make a new world through our decisions to confront this ideology in its various forms today, tomorrow, and into the future. It will not be easy. It will take time and effort. But we can forge a new path for American Christianity, one freed from the temptation to protect our own and exert power over others toward selfish ends.

In virtually every movie about time travel, someone warns the protagonist not to influence the lives or choices of those in the past too much. The repercussions could be so far-reaching as to completely remake the present. One little choice could radiate outward in unimaginable ways, altering the very fabric of reality in the present day. When watching *Back to the Future* or *Avengers: Endgame*, we naturally accept this idea. However, we rarely apply the same logic to our own lives. We fail to see how a seemingly insignificant decision we make today could dramatically alter the future.

What if we began to live our lives believing that even small actions we consistently take now—a practice of faithful resistance—can reverberate through our communities, congregations, denominations, nation, and world? Changes we make to our organizations and institutions now can dramatically alter their functioning in decades to come. Even simple questions we pose to fellow Christians and our organizations that break through the taken-for-grantedness of Christian nationalism can have an impact. Questions like those that I faced at various moments of my journey might alter individual and organizational trajectories.<sup>25</sup>

While we cannot go back and change the past to reduce the negative influence of Christian nationalism on our civic life today, we *can* act today in order to change tomorrow. I am convinced we must at the very least try.

What you choose to do today to confront white Christian nationalism—in your own life, the lives of those around you, or the systems of which we are all a part—matters. We can commit now to consistently making these choices, hoping that the seeds planted, however small, will someday grow and provide shade to the entire garden—where we *all* can flourish.