

## BIBLE & THEOLOGY

# The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly of Christian Nationalism

## A Baptist Perspective

APRIL 27, 2023 | PATRICK SCHREINER

What is Christian Nationalism? Maybe this is a tired question, and you're weary of reading about the topic. But in some ways, our perspective on the issue is clearer now than it was in the weeks and months and years since the phrase came into the national spotlight. The dust has somewhat settled, and the time for hot takes has ended.

"Christian Nationalism" has become a junk box into which everyone piles his own conceptions. But it's not monolithic. Three dominant perspectives on Christian Nationalism have arisen over the past several years. Some equate Christian Nationalism with rioting at the U.S. Capitol on January 6. Others say it's any attempt to enforce God's law in a country. Others claim it's advocating for Christian values on issues such as abortion. How you view the movement depends almost entirely on your circles.

To maintain the unity established by the Spirit, Christians must ask what a person means by a phrase before we jump to judgment. We want to be quick to listen and slow to speak (James 1:9). We should highlight three different forms of Christian Nationalism and evaluate each one.

Although different Christian traditions view the church-state relationship dissimilarly, my analysis comes from a Baptist perspective. Baptists have long advocated for religious freedom and the separation of church and state. Baptists have been wary of theonomy, but have supported governments instituted by God while engaging in political dissent as needed.

## **Good: Influence of Christianity in American Civil Life**

For some, Christian Nationalism simply means that *Christianity has influenced and should continue to influence the nation*. They argue America was founded on transcendent Christian principles. The Declaration of Independence affirms "all men are created equal" and "are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Such a principle is worthy of Christian advocacy alongside a biblical view of issues like marriage, sexuality, and abortion. Our nation would be improved by affirming the goodness of natural law principles.

In the best sense, this form of Christian Nationalism doesn't attempt to dominate the political process or make the nation completely Christian but seeks instead to bring change by persuasion. Rather than trying to overthrow the government, adherents advocate their cause by supporting laws, electing candidates, podcasting, writing, and developing think tanks. They won't force their opinions, but they also won't be taken down from arguing for them.

Religion will always have a place in politics. Everyone has a “religion” she promotes. The best form of Christian Nationalism advocates for Christian principles just like secular nationalism advocates for secular principles.

If a Christian Nationalist is someone who believes that as citizens our views should influence our nation, then surely every Christian falls under that label. But this isn’t what most people mean by Christian Nationalism.

**“Religion will always have a place in politics. Everyone has a ‘religion’ she promotes.”**

## **Bad: Fusion of Christianity and American Civil Life**

Some view Christian Nationalism as a *fusion of Christianity with American civil life*. Although this might not sound different from the above, a fusion means Christianity and American life should coalesce. The political process should be overhauled to serve God. The laws of the United States should be explicitly Christian.

The fusion view is flawed in at least three ways. First, it contradicts the Christian philosophy of witness. Christ’s kingdom is to be advocated by persuasion, not power. Conversion must be a free choice, not instituted by command—compelled by the Spirit rather than instituted by human law. According to John Revelation, Christians follow Christ in his victory primarily by witnessing to the reign of Christ, not by enacting laws. We follow a politic of persuasion all the way down. Revelation 12:11 says we conquer by “word of [our] testimony.” We imitate Christ’s victory through suffering. This is our main political witness. We conquer not by fighting the culture war but by embodying Jesus’s cross-shaped victory. His blood declares him the King of the universe, and our blood speaks to our solidarity with him. We continue to speak of and demonstrate Jesus’s cross in our own lives and so remain faithful in a pagan society.

Second, the fusion view doesn’t respect the temporal distinction between this age and the age to come. We live in the gap between Christ’s resurrection and his second coming. In this time, religious freedom, diversity, and pluralism are blessings to God’s people who wish to live a “peaceful and quiet life” (1 Tim 2:2). In this age, we can’t institute or codify God’s law in totality. That day will come, but it will be done by Christ himself—the true King. As citizens of the kingdom of God, we point forward to the kingdom but never forget the age we inhabit. We live in the age of choice. God has honored humans enough to give them time to repent. This doesn’t mean neglecting the natural order God created for humanity’s good, but it also doesn’t mean seeking to establish the theocratic state.

Third, this form of Christian Nationalism goes against key features of the American experiment, mainly pluralism and religious liberty. The First Amendment of the Constitution says, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” Although America does have a distinctly Christian past, this form of Christian Nationalism overlooks the pluralism and religious liberty for which many founding fathers advocated. Eliminating all dissent might sound attractive, and it certainly would allow governing authorities to get things done more quickly. But squashing dissent violates human liberty, equality, and the vision of the founding fathers. It requires coercion of and change from those who dissent. If taken to its logical conclusion, this Nationalism undermines the foundation of a free society. Should such a fusion dominate American civil life, it would divide the nation rather than unify it. Uniformity in some aspects of national life isn’t all bad, but that must always exist beside diversity.

For all these reasons, this form of Christian Nationalism is unbiblical, idealistic, and philosophically unsound. Yet this view remains “bad” and not “ugly” because they’re not trying to overthrow the government. Our critiques of the fusion view, then, should sound different than our rebuke of a darker form of Christian Nationalism.

## Ugly: Dominion of Christianity over American Civil Life

Christian Nationalism can also turn ugly. It can become *a cultural framework that idealizes and advocates a fusion of Christianity with American civil life and does so by dominion*. This is the type of Christian Nationalism exhibited by some on January 6. This is the complete conflation of God and country and advocating for it by force or violence when deemed necessary.

The critiques of the second position apply here as well, but the phrase “Christian Nationalism” is, at its core, a confusion of categories. Although we can affirm and even celebrate the role Christianity has play in America as a nation, America can’t ever be described as a “Christian nation.” No nation-state can be a Christian nation-state, because Christianity doesn’t work that way.

As Lee Camp and I have suggested, Christianity and nation-states are two vastly different entities. In terms of access, people enter Christianity by voluntary intention (faith and baptism) but usually enter nation-states by arbitrary historical accident (being born in the region). Geographically, Christianity is transnational and bounded by no lines, but all nation-states are defined by borders.

Nation-states defend their borders by using military might and building walls, but Christianity breaks down ethnic barriers and crosses borders to welcome all who repent and believe. Unlike nation-states where their citizens are largely monocultural, Christianity encourages diversity and multiformity.

Nation-states are interested in their own agendas, but Christians put others before themselves. Nation-states see their own shortcomings as not living up to their ideals and potential, but Christians recognize their shortcomings stem from their corrupt nature. The hope of nation-states is utopia by their own ingenuity, but Christianity says utopia will only be brought by another.

The following table summarizes these differences:

The Difference Between Nation-States and Christianity		
Category	Nation-States	Christianity
Entrance	Arbitrary historical accident	Voluntary intention
Geography	Borders	Transnational
Defense	Army, military, building walls	Erases borders, breaks down walls
Citizens	Monochromatic	Multiform
Agenda	Their own interests	The interests of others
Shortcoming	Not living up to potential and ideals	Corrupt nature
Hope	In their own ingenuity	In the work of another

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## “To claim America is a Christian nation confuses categories.”

It’s wrongheaded to try to enforce the fusion by force. Jesus explicitly said his kingdom is not of this world. If it were, his servants would fight (John 18:36). We advocate for the end of abortion, but we don’t kill doctors who perform abortions. We can march and protest, but we don’t form mobs of destruction. We want to elect candidates of integrity and conviction, but we don’t harass public officials at town halls or school board meetings.

When Jesus was arrested, his disciples asked him, “Shall we strike with the sword?” (Luke 22:49). Then Peter struck the high priest’s servant and cut off his right ear. But Jesus said, “Put your sword back into its place. For all who take the sword will perish by the sword” (Matt. 26:52). No biblical view of Christian political engagement can include violence as endorsed by the dominion view.

## More Definition, Not Less

To speak of “Christian Nationalism” is to open the door to disagreement. We must define what we mean by our terms. John Wilsey is right to say Christian Nationalism “has often been articulated in ways that pervert Christianity’s message. But we should work to understand it, and when we condemn it, we should do it in precise terms.”

By using these three categories for understanding Christian Nationalism and critiquing each one on its own terms, we can remain hopeful for change and clarity as we continue to discuss the relationship of Christianity to politics.

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