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First Presbyterian Church

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“Christian Nationalism: A Theological error”

1st in a series

Friends, Christian Nationalism has been on my heart and mind for some time. I’ve been thinking about this sermon series for quite a while, and originally had planned on doing it in July to coincide with the 250th anniversary of our nation’s founding. So, when Susan Kester first suggested I preach about it, I didn’t wait too long to purchase Amanda Tyler’s book How to End Christian Nationalism. Tyler, a Baptist, leads the Christians Against Christian Nationalism initiative. She, along with Andrew Whitehead, who led a Tough Talk for us on Christian Nationalism back in 2022, speak extensively about the subject. I followed Tyler’s book with The Bible According to Christian Nationalists. Next week, in a sermon titled “Gerrymandering the Bible”, we’ll look at how Christian nationalism exploit scripture for political power and we’ll get a refresher on how Presbyterians read scripture.

All of this is to say, I’ve been doing a lot of reading on the subject. But please know, I’m not an expert on the subject. However, when the General Assembly declared this summer that white Christian Nationalism (more on the whiteness of CN in week 3) a theological error, I knew I had to say something. I very much appreciate that our denomination kept the subject theological rather than political. Otherwise, people may have looked the other way or said: there they go again, being political, or too woke, or some other nonsense.

Christian nationalism is a theological error, and I say that not because I’m woke, but because I’m a Christian. I also want to state from the outset that I love my country. But I love God more, and I love my church more (church with a capital C), and what we’re witnessing with Christian nationalism is deeply troubling and a pervasion of the gospel message. There is nothing Christian about Christian nationalism. It is an entirely political movement that has

turned love of country into idol worship, which I believe the Bible tells us we shouldn't do.

By the way, the vote at General Assembly wasn't even close: 459-25. But what exactly do we mean by labeling something a theological error? Is it as bad as it sounds? Yes. It is.

Historically, the label theological error has been reserved for things like Arianism, which denied the full divinity of Christ; or Docetism, which denied his full humanity. Those were considered errors of theology, of the Christian faith itself. We're not just saying "we don't like this movement", we're saying Christian Nationalism teaches a false version of Christianity.

So why is it false?

Christianity, at its core, is a simple religion. Not easy, but simple Jesus gave us two commandments. Only two! To love God, and to love our neighbors. Christian nationalism distorts that, and is a movement that loves power more than the power of love. Christian nationalism is a movement that pursues political power in the name of God, and it does this by twisting and distorting scripture to fit a preferred political ideology., often leaving out huge sections of the Bible that don't fit its vision of how God or people should act. This political ideology professes that our country's founders wanted the United States to be a Christian nation; that we should be a Christian nation, and because of that Christians should have a privileged placed in society.

None of which is historically accurate.

But let's talk first about the separation of church and state. This is a bit of a history lesson, but it's an important one – the Constitution provides that religion and government will be separate. America was not founded as a Christian nation. That is a myth. The framers of the Constitution were well aware of religion's power to split a nation apart. And, they wanted none of that; they wanted something new.

The tradition, of course, was state-supported religion. Many people thought religion couldn't exist without the financial support of the government, and

many thought the state couldn't exist with the moral and spiritual support of the church. So what they proposed: the idea of freedom of religion, was very radical

And here's where I always like to remind people that Presbyterians were deeply involved in that cause. In January 1776, the Rev. John Rodgers, pastor of the Presbyterian Church on Wall Street, preached a fiery sermon in which he exhorted the young men in his congregation to be brave and to fight for their freedom. And when the Declaration of Independence was signed, the only clergyperson to sign it, himself a member of Congress, was John Witherspoon, a Presbyterian minister and President of the College of New Jersey, later Princeton.

When they gathered a few years later to write the Constitution, they did something no country had yet done: they separated the church from the state, or the state from the church. There would be no religious litmus test for holding public office. The government would not establish religion, nor would it interfere with the right of people to practice any religion freely. there would be tolerance, acceptance of different religions, and a respect for religious diversity that to this day is a marvel to behold and should be upheld by all.

And this church has upheld that belief! We have always been a church that respects the religious beliefs of others. Just before Christmas 1882, a fire destroyed our third building, leaving the congregation devastated and without a church home. But in an amazing show of kindness, the congregation was invited to hold worship in the synagogue of the **Congregation Achduth Vesholom**. The two congregations shared one sacred space for over two years and built a remarkable relationship of unity, compassion, and neighborly love that continues today. Indeed, on Tuesday I'll meet with Rabbi Meir and other faith leaders to plan this year's interfaith Thanksgiving worship service.

So that's the separation of church and state in a nutshell, and a little bit of First Pres history to support it.

Christian nationalism, however, requires a carefully curated, cherry-picked version of American history to thrive, and it usually sounds this: The US was founded as Christian nation, based on Christian principles, and has a special role to play in God's plan for humankind. If our leadership or national values stray too far from traditional Christianity, God will withdraw his blessings from the nation.

Friends, do we believe in a God that small, that we would diminish God in such a way that somehow God only belongs to us? That God's power and sovereignty is dependent on who holds office? There is nothing to be gained by a cozy alliance of the church and state. When that happens, we lose our prophetic voice and our ability to speak truth to power and our ability to imagine a completely different world. Folks, we want church and state to be separate. As people of faith, do we really want the government telling us how we should worship? I don't! Do we really want our elected/public officials to legislate what we can and cannot do here?

Do any of us really believe this is what Jesus wanted? Jesus -- A savior who was executed by the state for what he did and stood for? Does any of that make sense for you?

Which leads me to our gospel reading from today, the issue of taxes and Caesar. First, this isn't simply a debate about paying taxes. That's just a red herring, and Jesus knows it. Just prior to this debate, Jesus made his fateful entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, and he cleansed the temple and denounced all the religious leaders. In other words, he's really upset he powers that be with his actions -- both state and religious power. So, this debate about taxes is colored by that, and they want to paint a picture of Jesus as a threat to the religious and political powers that be, and they're using taxes to trap him. "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?" they ask him. It's a trick question.

The real question is to whom are you going to give your allegiance? Rome, or God? Country or God?

A little bit of background on the story: Jews in the 1st century paid all sorts of taxes: temple taxes, land taxes, and customs taxes, just to name 3. But the tax in question in our story was an imperial tax that supported Rome and the Roman occupation of Israel. In other words, Jews had to pay their oppressors to oppress them. You can imagine how well that went over.

But not everyone saw it as a bad thing. Some people – the Herodians from our story -- supported paying the tax – because they allied themselves with Rome. And others, the Pharisees, opposed the tax because it required them to use a special coin that proclaimed Caesar was Lord, and using that coin was a violation of the first two commandments.

So when they ask Jesus if it's lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not, the Pharisees hope he'll say yes so they can prove to the Jewish people that he's a Roman sympathizer, which will make the Jews turn against him. And the Herodians, the Roman sympathizers, want him to oppose paying the tax to Caesar so they can accuse him of treason.

What Jesus answers, of course, is as compelling today as it was then. "Render unto Cesar what is Caesar's. But give to God what is God's."

What belongs to God? Friends, everything is God's. Everything belongs to God. It's one of our core beliefs. "Praise God from whom all blessings flow." Our lives, our heart and mind and soul and strength, even the money in our pocket, belongs to God.

At the very heart of religious faith is a deep and profound commitment that exceeds all other commitments. **All** other commitments, including our commitment to our country. For Christians, our first and primary allegiance is to Jesus Christ, thus to the way of Jesus: the way of forgiveness, grace, peace, and compassion, as opposed to the way of the empire: the way of retribution, greed, and rule by force. When we claim Jesus as Lord, we are saying that our

first commitment is to follow Jesus and embody his teachings, and everything else in our lives is secondary, including our politics.

Our faith always comes first. Politics always sits in the backseat. Someone recently wrote, “Too, often, Christians begin with partisan loyalties and then construct a theology to justify them.” (Opinion, Gina Zimmerman, “Much more Christian, far less nationalist”, Journal Gazette, July 25, 2026) That’s true, and backwards. The gospel shapes our faith, and then our faith shapes our politics. Faith always sits in the front seat.

Friends, there’s much more to be said. But I have 2 more weeks. However, I will say this: just like Christian nationalism champions only one version of Christianity being the true version, it also champions there is only one way to love our country. I want to to push back on that.

The late William Sloane Coffin once wrote. “How do you love America? Don’t say, ‘My Country right or wrong.’ That’s like saying, ‘My grandmother, drunk or sober’; it doesn’t get you anywhere. Don’t just salute the flag and don’t burn it either. Wash it. Make it clean” (*Credo*).

one can be a Christian and a patriot without being a Christian nationalist. An appropriate patriotism loves our country enough to be critical and to always hope and pray and work toward the goal of our nation living up to its own highest and most noble ideals and values. It is not right to say that the only true patriotism is one of affirmation. A true patriotism also dissents because it loves this country and its highest ideals and values so much that it is willing to object and protest when those ideals and values are not honored. And a true Christianity works towards the higher ideals.

This church has never shied away from that work. After the fire in the 3rd building, we moved to our 4th building. But that grew too small, so in 1956, you moved here, and you continued to evolve during the tumultuous 1960’s, balancing Christian belief with rising demands for civil rights for all Americans. Discussion groups were held; public speakers were invited and talk back sessions with the pastor were utilized to bring awareness to key social issues.

One notable moment came on June 5, 1963, when Dr. Meister introduced Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. before his speech at the Scottish Rite Auditorium in Fort Wayne. Following the event, Dr. Meister invited Dr. King for dinner in the second-floor parlor. And not b/c Dr. Meister was woke, but because he was Christian, and his faith compelled him to listen and learn from Dr. King. From its earliest days, First Presbyterian has believed that Christian witness extends beyond the walls of the church, calling both clergy and members to care for the welfare of others and to advocate for justice and social reform.

May we always continue to do so.

Amen.

Sources:

Pcusa.org, "Confronting White Christian Nationalism"

Amand Tyler: Christians Against Christian Nationalism

Feasting on the Gospels, Matthew, Volume 2, commentary for Matthew 22