

## "The Heresy of Christian Nationalism"

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Psalm 33:12-22; Acts 10:34-48

Last week, I pointed out that Jesus wasn't a Christian. Since we're continuing to hear plans to make America a Christian nation again, I feel I need to point out today that Jesus was not an American. Not many of us would say that he was, of course, but we Americans, being a majority-Christian country, tend to act as though Jesus unreservedly supports our way of life.

But I ask again, as I have asked many times before, where in the New Testament do we read that Jesus endorses the American way of life – the lifestyle of a tiny, tiny few having monstrous wealth – like a \$45 billion pay package – while others go hungry? Of those of us who can afford to gate ourselves off from our neighbors instead of loving them as we love ourselves? And of writing laws that allow us to shoot first and ask questions later? Where do we read any sort of endorsement of this way of life in the foundational Christian document?

We Americans, who close the gap between our way of life and Jesus' way of life, stand in a long tradition of Christian nationalism, which is the fusing and confusing of cultural values with Christian teaching. How did this happen?

It happened between the ascension of Jesus and the Edict of Thessalonica in 380. During those early centuries of Christianity, the twelve versions of Christianity that Jesus' apostles carried to all the corners of the known world grew up in the soil of a variety of cultures. It was inevitable that Christianity would take different forms, because Jesus had twelve apostles, not one. And, human nature being the fallen reality that it is, it was just as inevitable that those various versions of Christianity would compete with one another, come into conflict with one another, and come into conflict with their surrounding culture. From the very beginning, we Christians have been troublemakers, and that trouble has not always been the "good trouble" that the late Congressman John Lewis endorsed. Much of that trouble has been internecine squabbling and bickering over which version of Christianity is the "real" version, a lamentable absence of generosity of spirit that plagues our religion to this day.

And so, very early on – and I'm talking from the time of the conversion of Constantine the Great in 312 – whenever a group of Christians has had the opportunity to enlist the power of the sword to enforce their views, we've taken it, with very few exceptions. Lord Acton's maxim that "power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely" applies as much to Christians as to anyone else, and since the fourth century, we've never seemed to be able to do as Jesus did and resist the temptation to use power to enforce our views. And as sword-wielding Christian empires such as the Holy Roman Empire broke apart into modern nation-states, Christian nationalism was born. And it is a heresy.

If we read the New Testament honestly and take the example of Jesus seriously, we cannot avoid the conclusion that using the power of the state to enforce religious views is wrong. Jesus refused to use violence in any form to enforce his views, and violence, in one form or another, is the ordinary means by which the state enforces its will. That will may be the will of a monarch or a dictator, it may be the will of an oligarchy, or it may be the will of a majority of the populace; but compelling rather than persuading is the modus operandi of the state, and compelling rather than persuading is not the way of Jesus.

The way of self-sacrificial love is the way of Jesus, and no state lives to sacrifice itself. States exist to preserve themselves, and they do that primarily and ultimately through the exercise of power expressed in various forms of violence – some subtle, such as economic pressure, deprivation, and exclusion, and some crude, such as warfare and a militarized constabulary.

A year or so ago, Francis and I were upstairs working in my study, and we glanced out the window and saw that the local police department had brought over their SWAT unit for the kids in the summer camp to explore. The kids were climbing in and out of the armored vehicle as the officers and teachers

stood nearby, and Francis and I wondered aloud to each other, Where is the peace unit for the kids to crawl all over?

About forty years ago, I wrote a fiery letter to a famous preacher who said that the church was the handmaid of the state. In no uncertain terms, I told him that the church is the Body of Christ on earth and, as such, is nobody's handmaid.

When the church absorbs the values of the culture and calls them Christian, it distorts the person and teaching of Jesus, and that is heresy, and that includes the cultural soil in which Christianity was born. Jesus called male apostles, for example, because female apostles would have been both endangered and rejected by patriarchal culture, but that is no reason for Jesus not to have fully-functional, fully-authorized ministers who are women today. Jesus never explicitly rejected slavery, to take another example; it was part and parcel of the culture in which he lived and worked. But that silence does not amount to an endorsement of slavery, despite the fact that many preachers in the ante-bellum American South said that it was.

The founders of our country recognized a truth that is in perpetual danger of being lost, namely, that mixing the state and religion is bad for both. The state's use of power corrupts religion, and religion's focus on the conscience of the individual is antithetical to the conformity necessary for a functioning state. Religion is supposed to produce moral individuals and moral individuals, if they are genuinely living out their faith, produce moral nations. Too often, however, the pernicious effect of groupthink undermines personal morality, producing, in Reinhold Niebuhr's famous and sexist book title, "Moral Man and Immortal Society."

Is such a dichotomy inevitable, as Niebuhr argued? Or is it possible for individual religious believers, desiring the wellbeing of all, to refuse to capitulate, time and again, to the nation-state's way of doing things?

I said last week that God is not only the believer's destination, but God is also the believer's path; God is the only way to God. The world is the way to the world; God is the way to God, and we progressives especially need to be cautious about our glib acceptance of fitting in with our society. I believe all of us have much to learn from our siblings, such as the Amish, who use such means as distinctive dress and a non-violent lifestyle to retain their distance from our go-along-to-get-along world. As we celebrate the religious freedom that we enjoy in this country, might we use that freedom to explore our own ways of being the leaven, salt, and light that Jesus calls us to be? Might we recognize, as patriotic citizens, that it is the function of religion to be the conscience rather than the handmaid of the state? Are we prepared, as Jesus was, to resist the state's insistence on allegiance and conformity? When will we Christians stand up in public, put our hands over our hearts, and say together, "I pledge allegiance to the Prince of Peace, and to the values for which he lived, was crucified by the state, and rose again?"

In a few minutes, we'll celebrate communion, the Christian adaptation of the last Jewish Passover seder Jesus celebrated with his disciples. What was celebrated in Passover then and celebrated in Passover today is freedom – the freedom to be God's people rather than Pharaoh's people. In communion, we celebrate that same freedom – to be God's people rather than people enslaved to the security of our militarized consumerist economy and the political scaffolding that supports it, both of which provide us with our own versions of the fleshpots of Egypt. "For freedom Christ has set you free," Paul wrote to the Galatians, "so stand firm and do not return to a yoke of slavery."

Will we exercise our freedom in Christ, or will we enslave ourselves to the mores, dictates, policies, practices, laws, and desires of our own making? Will we preserve the integrity of our Christian faith, or will we continue to allow it to be co-opted by the ways of our own nation-state?

That choice is stark and it is real and – in this great country – it is ours.