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Christian Nationalism and the Church
Restoring the Primacy of Christian Identity

By
Kay Gabrysch

A Dissertation Submitted to
the Faculty of Covenant Theological Seminary
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Ministry.

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine the effects of Christian nationalism on the American church and examine how pastors can strengthen a Christian identity in congregants that supersedes that of Christian nationalism. Pastors face a number of unaddressed challenges created by the infiltration of the polarizing political issues that cause threats to both corporate church unity and individual spiritual growth in congregants.

This study utilized a qualitative design using semi-structured interviews with six senior pastors, one theological director of an international Christian publication, and one former religious liberties attorney who is currently a religion and politics commentator who interviews pastors weekly for a news organization. The interviews focused on gaining data with four research questions:

1. What are some of the characteristics of Christian nationalism that pastors are observing within their congregations?
2. What are some of the ways pastors are addressing what they are observing?
3. What are the some of the ways troubled congregants are responding to pastors?
4. What encourages pastors who are dealing with this?

The literature review focused on three key areas to allow the reader to better understand the phenomenon of Christian nationalism and the varying degrees of threat it poses to the church in America. In addition to a review of the biblical framework of

identity, those areas were: political identity markers of Christian nationalism, correlation of information illiteracy with Christian nationalism, and the lack of principled pluralism in Christian nationalism thought.

This study concluded that there are several necessary components to addressing the issues and strengthening Christian identity. They are honest reflection on the past, better understanding of corrosive ideas in the present, and responsible action in the future. Related to these components, this study found that pastors face major challenges in shepherding their people: the lack of congregants' biblical and historical knowledge, the proliferation of information sources that create congregants' antipathy toward those who disagree with them, and congregants' lack of desire to commit to a healthy way of living within a pluralistic nation. To address these challenges, this study identified practices which will contribute to better knowledge, civil friendship and respect for fellow image bearers, and a commitment to upholding healthy pluralism in America as a follower of Christ.

To Tasha Chapman, Zack Eswine, Mark Ryan and the Cultural Apologetics and
Communication cohort

You have to quit confusing a madness with a mission.

— Flannery O’Conner,
The Violent Bear It Away

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Abbreviations

PCA	Presbyterian Church in America
CRT	Critical Race Theory
PRRI	Public Religion Research Institute

Chapter 1

Introduction

In the American church in this current cultural moment, there is a conflation of political ideologies with the tenets of Christianity to the extent that some Christians have begun realigning their faith to fit their endorsed political theory. At a time when the word “identity” has entered the American parlance in such a politically charged way, many Christians are demonstrating that they too can construct identifications for themselves that supersede the one given to them by God. While most pastors believe that discipleship regarding these cultural issues should be a part of their engagement with congregants, many feel limited to speak out in this combative atmosphere for fear of negative reactions from church members, so intense are the disagreements between those who once followed Jesus in harmony.

This internal threat to the Church has been compared to a situation from an 80’s horror movie in which a baby-sitter is terrorized by a caller on the phone. When the police are finally able to trace the caller’s location, they issue the dire warning to the sitter that, “The calls are coming from inside the house.” The point of this analogy is that the greatest threat to the stability of the Church, according to the research, is not the immorality of the cultural headwinds blowing against it from the outside, but the fragmentation that is happening inside the Church due to some Christians’ unique fealty to their political ideologies.

Over the past few decades, feeling the pressure of cultural and moral decline, Christians have been directing their energies away from the focus of individual spiritual formation that equips them to live out the gospel’s demands of selflessness, humility, and

community for the sake of the world. Instead, the emphasis has shifted to an ascendant passion for war against the cultural issues of contemporary society, a mandate not found in scripture. When Peter addressed the Church by its primary identity, “God’s elect” (1Peter 1:1) and “a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation (1 Peter 2:9), and instructed them to live as “foreigners and exiles” (1Peter 2:11), he never exhorted them to challenge the culture or attempt to remove the Roman emperor from the throne and establish Christian rule. In a society dominated by that which was an abomination to God, the apostles urged the believers to live as strangers in a land that would be aberrant to them, not assimilating into the culture, nor withdrawing from it, nor raging against it because it did not sanction their beliefs. The New Testament writers encouraged the Church by reminding them theirs could not be an entitlement mentality that expected the pagan culture to accommodate itself to their values or their counter-cultural ways. Rather, if Christians were visibly embracing their explicitly defined identity as the people of God whose mission was to bless the world for the sake of Christ and his kingdom, the pagans could not help but observe the patterns and practices which characterized the Christ-follower. The Christians believed the pagan culture would see both the distinctiveness and desirability of that way of life.

In this present state of cultural disequilibrium, the focus of many believers is being re-oriented to a very different goal, one that is primarily concerned with waging a type of war against cultural issues. Many Christians are discontent to live as an alternative society of exiles in occupied territory, adhering to the distinctiveness of the people of God in a “foreign land.” They have chosen instead to connect to an ideology determined to prioritize and privilege Christianity in the public square, turning everyone

who does not agree into an enemy of the state. In this movement that is characterized by several different degrees of adherence to Christian nationalism, Christians take on the responsibility for doing battle with perceived cultural enemies who would thwart their goal of a Christian nation. The deep emotional attachment to this movement is marked by a skewed version of American history, an inability to distinguish disinformation from truth, and a lack of desire to live amiably with others in a pluralistic, often contentious nation. The movement of Christian nationalism in the United States has created a primacy of place regarding duty to conservative America that has the potential to cause Christians to jettison the real mission of the people of God to bring blessing to the world. That mission, authorized by God and mandated for the Church, has never, since the coming of Christ, been dependent on any particular nation's religious beliefs or cultural practices.

Thomas Kidd, a historian and Distinguished Professor of history at Baylor University asks the pointed question, "How do you know when your measured patriotism has morphed into idolatrous Christian nationalism?"¹ He adds the proposal that today's Christian nationalists do not recognize those characteristics in themselves and even the most obvious and outspoken of them will usually vehemently deny the classification. Although he acknowledges that American Christians' patriotism is a good thing, he recognizes that any energetic commitment to a cause can cross over into idolatry, and become an ultimate pursuit that eclipses all others.

Two authors who have written extensively about the cultural waters in which Christians currently swim are Steve Wilkens, a professor of theology and ethics at Azusa

¹ Thomas Kidd, "Christian Nationalism vs. Christian Patriotism," The Gospel Coalition, December 18, 2020, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/christian-nationalism-patriotism/>.

Pacific University, and Mark L. Sanford, also an instructor at APU. They concur with Kidd regarding the ease with which Christians can transform a good thing like patriotism into an absolute good. Being an American, and better still, a “patriot,” has become, in their view, the fundamental identity of many Christians, with nationalism demanding a loyalty that it does not merit, constituting itself as a “competing religion.” Wilkens and Sanford explain their position, “Nationalism [...] is a jealous god that does not tolerate relegation of national identity to a position of relative significance [...] demands unlimited loyalty, frequently by co-opting religious language and goals for advancing its own agenda.”²

Many authors observed that when the nationalistic agenda is imported into the American church, Christians become factious and antagonistic toward each other. Anthony B. Bradley, Professor of Religious Studies at The Kings College of New York and author of various publications on this particular cultural issue, describes this attitude as “an adversarial demonization of those with whom we disagree [...] not simply as wrong but also as evil, pitting liberals and conservative Christians against each other in ways that make solidarity impossible. Each sees the other as the enemy of Jesus’ teaching.”³

Bradley is commenting here in an assessment of social scientist Jonathan Haidt’s work, *The Righteous Mind*. In his book, Haidt sets forth six moral foundations he believes any culture needs to function in morally principled ways: care, fairness, loyalty,

² Steve Wilkens and Mark L. Sanford, *Hidden Worldviews: Eight Cultural Stories That Shape Our Lives* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 75.

³ Anthony B Bradley, “Better Reasoning and Moral Foundations May Unite Us,” Henry Center for Theological Understanding, April 22, 2021, <https://henrycenter.tiu.edu/2021/04/better-reasoning-and-moral-foundations-may-unite-us/>.

authority, liberty, and sanctity. Together, according to Haidt, they form a moral infrastructure which he believes is indicative of an ideal flourishing community. Although the secularist Haidt is not a part of the Church, he identifies an over-reach of any loyalty in this way: “The original trigger for the loyalty foundation is anything that tells you who is a team player and who is a traitor.”⁴ Applying these labels to the Church, when half of it (the conservative right) thinks the other half has betrayed the faith and aligned itself with the enemy (the progressive left), cohesive community flounders. There is no nuanced middle ground or third way for those who have embraced Christian nationalism. As Haidt says, “Moral matrices bind people together and blind them to the coherence or even existence of other matrices. This makes it very difficult for people to consider the possibility that there might really be [...] more than one valid framework.”⁵ Bradley applies Haidt’s logic to the destructive influence that the social and political controversies have brought to bear on the American church: “Perhaps the reason we are so divided is not because of what is true but because of our *post hoc*, justificatory reasoning, tribal virtue-signaling, and differentiated moral foundations.”⁶ Bradley and Haidt’s conclusions indicate that both Christian and non-Christian observers see a Church with decreasing communal dimension and an absence of selfless, sacrificial love of neighbor, the very descriptors that are supposed to define the Christian.

⁴ Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 2013), 163.

⁵ Haidt. 129-30.

⁶ Anthony B. Bradley, "Better Reasoning and Moral Foundations May Unite Us." Henry Center for Theological Understanding, April 21, 2021, <https://henrycenter.tiu.edu/2021/04/>

The abrogation of the gospel witness of the Church due to the effects of Christian nationalism is a topic that undergirds each of these author's observations. Russell Moore, Director of the Public Theology Project at Christianity Today, writes about the effects of Christian nationalism on the culture at large and concludes, "evidence is mounting that a significant amount of secularization is accelerated and driven not by the 'secular culture,' but by evangelicalism itself [...] There is compelling data [...] that the [...] conflation of Christianity and nationalism is a key driver [...] away from religious affiliation."⁷ In concurrence with the other sources cited, Moore sees the demands of Christian nationalism as particularly at odds with Christianity and a stumbling block to unbelievers and Christians alike.

Political Identity Markers of Christian Nationalism

Christopher J.H. Wright is the international director for Langham Partnership and the author of several books on the mission and ethics of the people of God. He has a special focus on the biblical conduct of God's people, especially the implications of the idolatrous behavior of the historic nation of Israel. In his latest publication, he exposes what he believes to be the dangers today for the Church because of the idol of political power. According to Wright, God's people living in community have a responsibility to work in unity, committed to God's ways of engaging the culture. The Christian must engage politically in a way that honors the Lord and is good for society in general. Wright asserts, "Collusion, withdrawal, or violence – these are not options Jesus

⁷ Moore, Russell, "Losing Our Religion," Russell Moore, April 15, 2021, <https://www.russellmoore.com/2021/04/15/losing-our-religion/>.

commends to his own followers, then or now.”⁸ After describing what cultural and political engagement would necessitate for a follower of Christ – generosity, costly forgiveness, love for enemies, Wright then warns the contemporary church to learn from history, “It is remarkable how quickly Christianity morphed from being a persecuted community into a persecuting religio-political power [...] far distant from the teaching and example of Christ.”⁹

In accordance with Wright, William H. Mott, political and military commentator and author comments, “Like wealth, power becomes something to be grasped, defended, and selfishly used, an absolute status due to God alone”¹⁰ Mott and Wright agree that the goal of Christians in the public square is to promote Christian principles, not Christian power.

James Davison Hunter, Distinguished Professor of Religion, Culture and Social Theory at the University of Virginia, and a senior fellow at the Trinity Forum, observes along with Thomas Kidd that “among various Christian groups, the Christian Right has held disproportionate political power since the early 1980’s. Their concerns are narrowly conceived and do not at all represent the spectrum of Christian conviction.”¹¹ However, in an overlap with Christian nationalists, the Christian right depends on politics as the solution to problems, accompanied by an appeal to biblical authority to justify the

⁸ Christopher J. H. Wright, *“Here Are Your Gods”: Faithful Discipleship in Idolatrous Times* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2020), 127.

⁹ Wright. 127.

¹⁰ William H Mott, *Political Thought* (New York: Austin Macauley Publishers, 2018), 33.

¹¹ James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 167.

outcome. Although the politicization of issues from both conservatives and progressives cannot be over-estimated, according to Hunter it is conservative Christians who have been most impressive in their wielding of political mobilization beginning shortly after the conclusion of World War II.

Christian nationalism's veneration of America and idealized view of history is another identifying characteristic of this movement to be discussed at length. Many convictions of American Christians regarding the principles of the country's founding conflate American history with the identity and mission of the Church. Among the movement, there are many advocates of the idea that America was founded by Christians whose goal was to create a Christian nation in which Christianity was privileged in every realm of society. According to several historians whose work will be reviewed extensively, this is based on a misunderstanding of the founding in which there is a fusion of the purposes for the seventeenth-century religious settlement of the colonies and the nation that was actually constituted in 1776. John Fea, a historian who has written prolifically on this adds, "Behind all of this is the idea that God establishes covenants with nations much in the same way he made Israel his chosen people."¹² The ideology focuses its grievances on a narrative of lost national greatness at the hands of non-Christian groups who are not "real" Americans.

¹² John Fea, *Was America Founded as a Christian Nation? A Historical Introduction*, Revised edition (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016), 61.

Correlation of Information Illiteracy with Christian Nationalism

One of the dominant engines driving the uptick in Christian nationalist ideology is that many evangelicals have for some time now been putting their trust in conspiracy theories which are not rooted in any semblance of reality. According to William Partin, a research analyst studying the fringe conspiracy theories of QAnon at Data and Society's Disinformation Action Lab, reasoning is being overshadowed by intuitive responses to the latest conspiracy from a conversation bubble or echo chamber which excludes all other voices. The exclusivity of online conspiracy groups demands of their participants that they not listen to an outside source who might disagree with them. Partin reports, "QAnon followers often repeat that, in the presence of doubt [...] do your own research [...] that impulse will feel especially familiar to evangelicals [...] the kind of literacy that's implied here [...] has quite a bit in common with how evangelicals learn to read and interpret the Bible."¹³ Partin has determined that a conspiracy platform like QAnon intersects with Christian thinking by presenting itself as a force for good, designed to eradicate evils in the world, especially those seen as generated by the progressive left. Conspiracy theories are often undergirded by the antisocial personality traits of individuals willing to carry out war against the perceived evil.

Joe Carter, an editor for The Gospel Coalition and an associate pastor at McLean Bible Church in Arlington, VA, adds another dimension. "As with many other conspiracy theories, QAnon takes a plausible scenario [...] and distorts it until it becomes inconceivable [...] then dismisses contradictory evidence that would require abandoning

¹³ Abby Ohlseiher, "Evangelicals Are Looking for Answers Online. They're Finding QAnon Instead.," *MIT Technology Review*, August 26, 2020, <https://www.technologyreview.com/2020/08/26/1007611/how-qanon-is-targeting-evangelicals/>.

the story.”¹⁴ This trait was noticeable in a recent conversation with Mike Lindell, the founder of the extremely successful company, MyPillow, and election conspiracy activist. Anne Applebaum, a Pulitzer prize-winning historian and Senior Fellow at the Johns Hopkins School for Advanced International Studies, attempted in an interview to coax Mr. Lindell into accepting the possibility that he could be in error regarding his many conspiratorial ideas surrounding the 2020 presidential election. Her conclusion accords with Carter’s regarding conspiratorial thinking: “He [Lindell] is utterly impervious to any argument of any kind. I asked him what if, hypothetically, on August 10 it turns out that other experts disagree with his experts and declare that his data don’t mean what he thinks his data mean. This, he told me, was impossible.”¹⁵ These researchers agree that whatever it is informing the reasoning of Christian nationalist conspiracy advocates, they are stridently confident in their biases.

Christian Nationalism’s Lack of Principled Pluralism

In light of the acrimony and division that exists within many American churches because of these issues, many thoughtful Christians are offering alternative ways of engaging the world in a posture of humble, loving service.

The authors surveyed agree that Christians must first recognize the disunity inside the American church and understand that Christians have the moral, biblically mandated responsibility to undertake resolution of these issues. There is agreement that the Church

¹⁴ Joe Carter, “The FAQs: What Christians Should Know About QAnon,” The Gospel Coalition, May 20, 2020, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/the-faqs-what-christians-should-know-about-qanon/>.

¹⁵ Anne Applebaum, “The MyPillow Guy Really Could Destroy Democracy,” *The Atlantic*, July 29, 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/07/mike-lindells-plot-destroy-america/619593/>.

must engage faithfully in a pluralistic society to facilitate a biblical witness of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Russell Moore charges, “What America needs from the church right now is for the church to tell a different story—the story of a crucified, resurrected, and reigning Jesus of Nazareth, in whom all things hold together (Col. 1:17).”¹⁶ Unity in him and witnessing to him amid the pagan culture is the purposeful and primary identity of the Christian and any attempt to forge a different one will result in counterfeit status and a failed mission for the church in America.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study is to examine how pastors strengthen a Christian identity in congregants that supersedes the identity of Christian nationalism.

Research Questions

The following questions guided the qualitative research:

1. What are some of the characteristics of Christian nationalism that pastors are observing within their congregations?
2. What are some of the ways pastors are addressing what they are observing?
3. What are the some of the ways troubled congregants are responding to pastors?
4. What encourages pastors who are dealing with this?

¹⁶ Russell Moore, “What’s Next for Christians in an Election That Won’t End?,” The Gospel Coalition, November 4, 2020, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/>

Significance of the Study

This study has significance for pastors and other ministry leaders whose desire is to spiritually form their people in order for them to live more faithfully for the kingdom of God within a pluralistic society. The findings will help pastors to identify the challenges of Christian nationalism in their own churches and better understand how to navigate those challenges. In addition, veteran pastors who are achieving church unity will encourage other pastors with practices and methods that strengthen identity in Christ rather than in political and cultural tribes. Throughout Paul's letters to the churches he shepherded, he continuously encourages Christians to function together as a body of people whose identifying characteristics are love and care for each other and the world in humility and self-giving sacrifice. The findings of this study may aid Christian leaders in making their people aware of the God-given primacy of that identity and offer practical ways to restore or strengthen it.

Definition of Terms

In this study, key terms are defined as follows:

Nationalism: “the belief that humanity is divisible into mutually distinct, internally coherent cultural groups defined by shared traits like language, religion, ethnicity, or culture [...] these groups should each have their own governments that [...] promote and protect a nation's cultural identity.”¹⁷

¹⁷ Paul D. Miller, “What Is Christian Nationalism?,” *Christianity Today*, February 3, 2021, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2021/february-web-only/what-is-christian-nationalism.html>.

Christian nationalism: the belief that the American nation and culture was defined at its inception by Christianity, and that Christianity should be the specific template by which the government today defines American culture and laws.

QAnon: a wide-ranging, unfounded conspiracy theory that began in 2017 with allegations that former President Trump was waging war against an elite group of Satan-worshipping pedophiles in politics, media, and business. The conspiracy has since evolved into many theories with an enormous number of unfounded claims and hundreds of thousands of followers world-wide.

Principled Pluralism: a way of engaging and living in humility and love with those who “differ from us in important and often insurmountable ways.”¹⁸

Critical Race Theory: the idea put forth in a work of legal scholarship at Harvard in the 1980’s that racism in America is not merely the product of individual bias or prejudice but has always been a systemic problem, deeply embedded in such structures as housing segregation, impact of criminal justice policies, etc. An example of structural racism would be “red-lining” from the 1930’s, when red lines were drawn around areas deemed poor financial risks and banks refused to lend money to individuals from those areas, the majority of whom were people of color. There are many areas of the study of race in the history of America that do not fall under the definition of CRT.

Information Illiteracy: an inability or unwillingness to identify, locate, evaluate and apply appropriate sources of information for the purpose of accurately meeting a particular information need.

¹⁸ John D. Inazu, *Confident Pluralism: Surviving and Thriving through Deep Difference* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 17.

Moral Majority: a political action group formed in the 1970's to further a conservative and religious agenda, including prayer in schools and strict laws involving abortion and gender issues. It mobilized conservative Christians as a political force for the Republican party.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

The purpose of this study is to examine how pastors can strengthen a Christian identity in congregants that supersedes the identity of Christian nationalism. The logical place to begin is to re-visit the biblical narrative which from beginning to end presents the theological framework for the identity of God's image bearers. There is an unrelenting call to imitate God collectively in an idealized society which would bless the entire world. After scripture lays the groundwork to demonstrate the primacy of this identity, an analysis of three relevant areas of literature will be presented to form a foundation for the qualitative research. These areas focus on literature concerning the over-arching identity markers of Christian nationalism, the necessity for Christians to acquire information literacy amidst a barrage of disinformation and erosion of truth, and a comprehension of principled pluralism that must be strengthened if Christians are to live as the image-bearing agents of the blessings God in his world.

Biblical Framework of Christian Identity Formation

From the creation of Adam and Eve, the goal for image-bearers of God has been imitation of the Creator to the extent that a reflection of his character permeated the world. Unfortunately, the history of the people of God as portrayed in the Old Testament demonstrates that through Adam's sin, doing what is "right in one's own eyes" became the metaphorical coat of arms for those who would rebel against their Creator. Instead of imitating God's character, humanity began challenging God's ways in every aspect of their lives and the evidence of their God-given identity commenced to erode. Their lives

had been intended, as C. John Collins describes, “to use all their capacities, those they share with the other animals and especially those that set them apart, in establishing a community that exercises dominion over God’s world, a dominion that reflects God’s faithfulness, wisdom, benevolence, and creativity.”¹⁹ For the mandate to have been faithfully and successfully carried out, the community would have had to be one in which humans did not act on their own individualistic desires. Rather, the people of God would have come to a place of moral maturation whereby doing what was right in their Creator’s eyes became intuitive, first nature to them. As the Puritan theologian John Owen reasoned regarding growth in holiness, “Frequency of acts doth naturally increase and strengthen the habits whereby they proceed. And in spiritual habits [e.g., faith, hope, love] it is so, moreover, by God’s appointment [...] They grow and thrive in and by their exercise [...] the want thereof is the principal means of their decay.”²⁰ They would have become people who knew the difference between good and evil because they had learned it from above and they would intuitively and habitually “always chose the good.”²¹

As God’s people served and cared for his creation, there would have been a clear understanding of what it meant to develop its potentials in ways that honor and celebrate the glory of the Creator. In the words of the prophet Amos, they would have been those who “seek good and not evil” (Amos 5:14). God’s people would have sought out and created systems that transcribed God’s character in the world. Collins adds, “The notion of the image of God, which establishes some kind of analogical resemblance between

¹⁹ C. John Collins, *Reading Genesis Well: Navigating History, Poetry, Science, and Truth in Genesis 1-11* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018), 74.

²⁰ John Owen, *The Works of John Owen. Vol. 3*, (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 2000), 389.

²¹ Collins, *Reading Genesis Well*, 178.

God and humanity, allows for ethical and philosophical exploration of what imitation would look like.”²² Old Testament narratives invited the careful hearers of the assembly to ascertain what imitating God would be like in both character and action and then commit to that identity formation. There could be no neutrality when the moral assessment was required. The very nature of the people was to be shaped as they observed and appraised the character of God’s image-bearers carrying out their roles in the biblical narrative. When actions, encompassed by virtuously played roles, developed into life stories which advanced and contributed to the idealized society, identity was formed in the people by their admiration and aspiration of those exemplary lives. The collective assembly would make decisions regarding good and evil according to what was observed in certain character’s lives and interaction with the community.

The Old Testament historians presented their stories using epideictic rhetoric which laid out the stories of Israel’s past for the sake of moral assessment. The practice of identifying the correlation to praiseworthiness or blameworthiness would inculcate orthodox values in God’s people. As Dale L. Sullivan explains in his dissertation on epideictic rhetoric in children’s literature, “appropriate attitudes in the audience [...] by a rhetoric of display that teaches values...Epideictic seems to have a special educative function because it attempts to demonstrate how certain actions exemplify virtues.”²³ When actions are appraised as praiseworthy there is an impetus to emulate and celebrate those actions so that praiseworthy identity is formed. C.S. Lewis was a master at this

²² Collins, *Reading Genesis Well*, 165.

²³ Dale L. Sullivan, *A Rhetoric of Children’s Literature as Epideictic Discourse*, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, June, 1988. 27,29,30.

method. No child was ever in doubt as to the virtue or lack of it in any of Lewis' Narnian characters. Christopher Wright has stated regarding the Old Testament historians, "They performed the task of collecting, selecting, editing and commenting on the stories of Israel's past – centuries of it – with consistent theological and ethical criteria and assessment. They were prepared to evaluate boldly events and people in a way that affirmed the ethical significance of both."²⁴ All these authors agree that the spiritual and moral formation of the identity of the people of God was the telos of this evaluation.

In considering their identity as a people, the ideal Israelite audience listened to the story of the Fall and witnessed the way Adam's spontaneous desire for self-rule abolished his status in the Garden. They were to understand that the temptation to disobey the divine commands was not only powerful but destructive when yielded to. The subsequent stories allowed them to gauge the misery caused by the desire for autonomy. Craig Bartholomew and Michael Goheen define autonomy as "choosing oneself as the source for determining what is right and wrong, rather than relying on God's word for direction."²⁵ What the Israelites observed were the results of Adam and Eve's autonomous lust to secure an alternate identity rather than the one given them by the Creator. They witnessed the swift moral degeneration of mankind after its expulsion from God's presence, and could identify the distortion of the image of God as humanity became bearers of jealousy, hatred, murder and all manner of flawed moral judgments. Identity of the fallen image-bearers living outside of the Garden was now characterized

²⁴ Christopher J. H Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), 33.

²⁵ Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 41.

by actions like Cain's jealous compulsion to murder Abel rather than be his "brother's keeper."

As the biblical story progressed, God fragmented the language and scattered the community that had coalesced around the idea of creating their own identity and security at Babel. With humanity dispersed and no nation on the earth worshipping the one true God, the Lord called one man out of a pagan idolatrous community to be the vehicle of blessing for the world and on whom he would confer a particular identity. God promised Abram that blessing would come to all the nations of the earth through him and his family, an ideal community living amid pagan culture. Abraham's true seed would include every individual who would participate faithfully within that community, living and developing for the sake of the world's flourishing. Collins explains the consequences of the failure to carry out that role, "At those times when the corporate life of the people is dominated by unfaithful members, the redemption or salvation includes divine judgments by which the unfaithful leaders are purged from the people."²⁶ In their role of corporate entity, God protected them time and again from numerous threats to their existence, including their own self-destructive ways, always continuing to form them into a people with a specific purpose, to be agents of his blessings to the entire world.

When he redeemed them from their 400 years of captivity in Egypt and lead them via Moses to the Promised Land, he not only affirmed them as his "treasured possession," (Ex. 19:5) he equipped them to carry out the exemplary legal, social and economic system which would set them apart from the other nations. The ethical concerns of the books of the Pentateuch were the moral measuring stick for how virtuously or poorly the

²⁶ Collins, *Reading Genesis Well*, 291.

human actors lived out of their identity in ways that were glorifying to God and contributive to blessing the world. The biblical witness could not have been more instructive. There were character codes established for them in the Pentateuch that held criteria and benchmarks for life in the Promised Land under the leadership of Joshua, the archetype for that entry period.

As the Bible's story continued to unfold, it exposed the lack of consciousness and appreciation for their own uniqueness that lead the people of God into enculturation and compromise. After the death of Joshua, "The people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and served the Baals. And they abandoned the Lord, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt. They went after other gods from among the gods of the peoples who were around them, and bowed down to them." (Judges 2:11-12) From the onset of the checkered leadership of the judges, abominations characterized Israel's identity. The book of Judges reflects the moral and spiritual degeneration of the people of God as they completely abdicated their responsibility and relinquished their status. Even with God standing ready to empower, strengthen, and engage with them in battle, they willingly ceded their God-given authority to conquer the land.

Because of their combination of fear, disobedience, and diminishing commitment, Daniel I. Block observes, "What was to be a triumphant campaign of conquest turns into an expedition of compromise."²⁷ Israel's faithlessness and fear overrode her loyalty to Yahweh's command to establish the sanctity of the place where a particularly suited

²⁷ Daniel Isaac Block, *Judges, Ruth*, The New American Commentary 6 (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 101.

people would dwell with him, worshipping him only. It was to have been the place where God's people would make his kingdom visible by loving and caring for each other wisely and well, causing the nations to marvel at the God to whom this community belonged. In Moses' locution as the people prepared to enter Canaan the goal was declared:

See, I have taught you statutes and rules as the Lord my God commanded me, that you should do them in the land that you are entering to take possession of it. Keep them and do them for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people." For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is to us, whenever we call upon him? And what great nation is there that has statutes and rules so righteous as all this law that I set before you today? (Deuteronomy 4:5-8)

According to Moses' words, if Israel would have remained obedient and loyal to Yahweh, her way of life would have been irresistible to the watching nations. But because she was disobedient and idolatrous, she defiled the name of the Lord and profaned her own identity.

Throughout the Old Testament, however, the Lord would bring to the forefront exceptional examples of the moral formation which he desired for his people. Amid the discreditable period of the Judges, with all its normalizing of evil, the biblical narrative presents the contrasting story of Ruth and Boaz. These characters allowed the assembly to recognize and celebrate the positive identifying marks of humanity that are worthy of praise and emulation. Within one of the darkest periods of the biblical story God demonstrated to his people through these two individuals that a healthy, well-functioning community should honor those who used their power, authority and resources for the sake of others, embodying the very Pentateuchal identity they were to cultivate.

Every genre in the Old Testament asserts the primacy of the formation of the spiritual and moral identity of the people of God. Even though many Christians

throughout the ages have appropriated the use of the Psalms for individual and corporate worship, the original purpose of these communal songs was the provision of models of praise, lament, thanksgiving, and prayer. Always the objective was to strengthen the community as a worshipping people and teach them how to function as covenant members of the assembly.

In other words, the Psalms served not just a performative but a didactic function by instructing the people of God how to live harmoniously with each other in exaltation of him. The Psalms were foundational and transformative in shaping spiritual character. They highlighted the contrast between the righteous and the wicked and gave the community an awareness of the ways in which these differences should manifest themselves in the lives of those who had embraced the covenant from the heart. As Jay Sklar explains, “Because the law reflected God’s character, and because God’s character is holy, righteous and good, those who walk according to His law will automatically avoid paths of sin that result in pain and misery. At the same time, they will walk on paths of truth, righteousness and goodness, which have inherent blessing in them.”²⁸ Holiness would characterize the lives of the idealized community in part because of their devotion to the instruction of the Psalms. It was because of what the Psalms taught God’s people about his steadfast love that believers knew they could depend on him in their pain and have hope even in inexplicable suffering. There was a strong doctrine of assurance created which allowed the people of God to trust him and rejoice together in how he had bountifully dealt with them in both blessing and trial. Derek Kidner says

²⁸ Jay Sklar, “Hebrew Poetry,” *Old Testament History and Theology*, Spring 2017, Covenant Theological Seminary, *Old Testament History and Theology*, p.64.

about the well-formed believer that there was a “certainty that he will have such a song to offer when he looks back at the whole way he has been led.”²⁹ The Psalms contributed extensively to the spiritual and moral formation of God’s people.

Likewise, the role of the Old Testament prophets was foundational in both identity formation and reformation. They preached to Israel, a people who had betrayed the pillars of their unique status: their election, land, monarchy, law, but most importantly, their relationship to Yahweh, their covenant God. Their prophetic messages were given to people who presumed they could claim their right to those externals in exchange for immunity from God’s judgment. But the Bible’s testimony confirmed that God’s covenant with Israel called for an internalization of the law which would create a ceiling, not a floor, of ethical behavior within the society. The theme of the prophets’ relentless message was that the people would be judged for a breach of that covenant and thus a betrayal of her very purpose. John Bright says that prior to the exile, the prophets preached the nation’s “funeral oration,”³⁰ proclaiming a metaphorical death of God’s unique people due to the failure to live in conformity to her God-given calling.

As the New Testament period opened and the gospel writers related their memories of Jesus’ person and work, hearers were invited to envision themselves inside the experience and identity of the kingdom citizens whom Jesus had come to save. From the Sermon on the Mount to the parables to his confrontations with the religious leaders, Jesus’ teaching was meant to bring people to a new level of sober judgment about their own identity and invite them to consider what it meant to live as a kingdom citizen in the

²⁹ Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 95.

³⁰ John Bright, *A History of Israel*, 3rd ed. (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1981), 334.

new age he was inaugurating. God's people were to reconsider their ways and change their behavior, fitting it to the idealized society he had always intended for them. There was a consistent aspect of Jesus' teaching regarding how antithetical the identity of the kingdom citizenry would be, not only to the world's ways but to the strong currents of nationalistic zeal present within the community of Israel.

The preeminent national leaders presented in the gospels are in striking contrast to the outsiders who manifested the clearest reflection of Jesus' own character – Samaritans, Roman centurions, and other noteworthy Gentiles. When Jesus challenged his listeners to envisage how kingdom citizens would extend compassion and love across well-defined boundaries of exclusion, he told stories like that of a Samaritan who quintessentially exhibited the kind of radical kindness and unselfishness Jesus expected from his followers. (Luke 10:25-37) While these individuals who were outside of the covenant of Israel were presented in a favorable light, consistently demonstrating the type of faith and conduct worthy of Jesus' commendation, his own disciples merited rebuke with regularity. In their nationalistic fervor, they struggled to understand that the values and ethics of the kingdom of God were in stark opposition to their desire for political power. When James and John made their request of Jesus, based on their own logic, to sit on either side of him in their bid for power and prestige, his response was unambiguous. To the assumption that the kingdom would be fundamentally about power, Jesus replied that in opposition to the world's ways, the identity of the kingdom citizen would be marked by selflessness and generosity. His followers would be distinct because contrary to exploiting power, they would be wielding influence for the purpose of the flourishing of others. (Mark 10: 35-45)

As the first century church began, the Spirit-empowered mission identified the people of God in the Church as those who would not only endure external hardship and opposition from the culture but internal tensions within. Even though the new churches suffered obstacles and ostracism, all was purposeful and necessary to transform them into the Christ-likeness which would identify them as followers of Jesus. As the Christian community's engagement with the world continued its unstoppable trajectory, its people were confronted by economic, social and political events that would constantly mitigate against their moral formation. But the letters of the apostles prompted them again and again to remember that gospel triumph was never going to be contingent on achieving wide cultural acceptance or political support for their mission. Throughout the story of the growth and expansion of the first century church, the epistles equipped and encouraged God's people to pursue their high calling of carrying out the divine agenda by living out of their identity in Christ. The letters spurred them to participate with boldness in God's mission of expanding his kingdom as they continued growing in the discipleship that would result in a visible proclamation of holiness. Their behavior was to demonstrate what it looked like for image bearers of God to be rightly related not just to him, not just to other image bearers, but to the whole of creation.

With every communication, the New Testament writers enjoined God's people to seek spiritual formation, cognizant of their lives as a part of his body. Just as it has throughout the ages, the early Christian community grappled with the issues of loving each other well, acknowledging a fuller understanding of the grace of God in Christ, and gaining a thorough grasp of what it meant to demonstrate Christ's character to a watching world. Germane to this study will be an understanding and strengthening of the primacy

of this biblical identity. The Bible testifies to the fact that now, as in every age, God's people need a constant reminder of the privilege and responsibility of living a spiritually formed life. As agents of God's blessing to his world, that life must exhibit radical kindness, promotion of peace, and selflessness, and a consistent striving to cultivate flourishing for all of God's creation.

Summary of Biblical Framework

Undergirding the biblical narrative is the truth that there is a God-given identity not to be superseded by any that the people of God might forge for themselves. God has created a people set aside to maintain a distinct and unambiguous character in the world for the sake of the world. There are abundant biblical criteria conveying the essential characteristics of those people for which there can be no abrogation if the mission of God is to succeed. Christopher J. H. Wright explains, "The mission of God is that dynamic divine love that drives God to seek the ultimate well-being and blessing of human beings by bringing them into a relationship with himself in which they love, worship, and glorify him and find their greatest joy in doing so."³¹

This mission advances as Christians in unity make Christ known by their imitation of him, drawing the world to his beauty. As Wright adds, "The Church is not just a container for souls until they get to heaven, but the living demonstration of the unity that is God's intention for the whole of creation."³² Carl R. Trueman, author and professor of biblical and religious studies at Grove City College, says regarding the

³¹ Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God's People* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 244-5.

³² Wright, *The Mission of God's People*, 274.

polarization of this moment, “Modern ethical discourse is chaotic because there is no longer a strong community consensus on the nature of the proper ends of human existence.”³³ In a world of injustice, idolatry, and communities in flux, the people of God are to demonstrate their belief in that telos. They are to indisputably answer the question of why God has left them here in this broken world.

The Church is to be the preeminent and most influential community to which the people of God belong as they live as the idealized, alternate society in the way God intended. Alisdair MacIntyre, renowned Scottish philosopher, posits, “a moral philosophy [...] characteristically presupposes a sociology.”³⁴ The biblical framework presented here has concluded that the Bible has unmistakably charted the moral foundations and goals for the sociology of the scripturally-bound community of the Church. Barriers to the advancement of God’s mission form when his people disregard that primary design and destination and create divergent identities for themselves.

Political Identity Markers of Christian Nationalism

Many of the factors contributing to the division in the American church today go largely unrecognized as the effects of Christian nationalism. However, there are common distinguishable characteristics of those involved in the movement with respect to social media usage, political candidate choices, and especially in the use of rhetoric surrounding the country’s founding. Everything consumed or dispatched is heavily freighted with

³³ Carl R. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 83.

³⁴ Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 33.

political implications. David Brooks, author and opinion columnist for the New York Times writes, “Partisan politics has swamped what is supposed to be a religious movement. Over the past couple of decades evangelical pastors have found that their 20-minute Sunday sermons could not outshine the hours and hours of [cable] News their parishioners were mainlining every week.”³⁵ Christians are being shaped and formed by those who would have them believe that biblical virtues are of secondary importance to their political pursuits.

The scholars and researchers examined do not contend that Christians should not be involved in politics. The history of America reveals many exemplary Christians who have engaged in politics to shape the nation in positive ways. However, as Paul D. Miller, Christian political theorist and research fellow with the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission reports, “They worked to advance Christian principles, not Christian power or Christian culture, which is the key distinction between normal Christian political engagement and Christian nationalism. Normal Christian political engagement is humble, loving, and sacrificial.”³⁶ The call of Christian nationalism is not a call to Christianity or faith in Christ; it is a call to power, to entitlement and the privileging of political agendas. Miller adds, “Christian nationalism takes the name of Christ for a worldly political agenda, proclaiming that its program is *the* political program for every true believer.”³⁷

³⁵ David Brooks, “The Dissenters Trying to Save Evangelicalism From Itself,” *The New York Times*, February 4, 2022, sec. Opinion, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/04/opinion/evangelicalism-division-renewal.html>.

³⁶ Miller, “What Is Christian Nationalism?”

³⁷ Miller.

One of the most meticulously researched books to date is by social scientists Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry. It examines many of the underlying causes and social consequences of this ideology that has attracted such a substantial following. After several years of comprehensive research, they have concluded that “...strong support for Christian nationalism is – without a doubt – a threat to a pluralistic, democratic society.”³⁸ According to Whitehead and Perry, those who hold to the view believe that the American government should unapologetically privilege Christianity in the public square to the extent that only Christian views are represented in America’s public policy, current self-identity, and interpretations of its own history. Christian nationalism, they conclude, is not about Christianity; it is unambiguously about privilege and power. It co-opts Christian symbols, language, and any representation of Christianity that would accommodate and expand its goals. Using large-scale quantitative data to develop conclusions about what Christian nationalism is and how it influences life and values, Perry and Whitehead argue, “Simply put, Christian nationalism is a cultural framework – a collection of myths, traditions, symbols, narratives, and value systems – that idealizes and advocates a fusion of Christianity with American civic life.”³⁹

According to several of the authors surveyed, many of the traits prevalent in Christian nationalism are paradoxically un-Christian in nature. It values authoritarian rule and justifies violence, deeming it necessary to preserve order, a stance that is antithetical to the teachings of Jesus. It idealizes clearly marked national boundaries and imbues them

³⁸ Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry, *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 161.

³⁹ Whitehead and Perry, 10.

with ultimate, cosmic significance, while ignoring the trans-national nature of the kingdom of God. In one of its greatest ironies, it exhibits an air of superiority that views outsiders as an undeserving threat and seeks to exclude non-Christians from America's civic life, in complete antithesis to Jesus commands to love your neighbor and welcome the sojourner.

Christian Nationalism's Divisiveness

This conflation of national and religious identity leaves its adherents no room for compromise or disagreement. There is a form of consequentialism involved in the movement where the ends justify the means and authoritarian measures are often regarded as necessary means. As Perry and Whitehead point out, "Strong support for Christian nationalism demands complete allegiance and ultimately desires the silencing and exclusion of its opponents from the public sphere. Such a stance makes it increasingly difficult to engage in good faith conversations about issues or find common ground."⁴⁰ Because of this a fracturing is occurring in the evangelical church which some observers say has the potential to erode it beyond repair as critical fissures form. Timothy Dalrymple, President and CEO of Christianity Today laments, "Couples, families, friends, and congregations once united in their commitment to Christ are now dividing over seemingly irreconcilable views of the world. In fact, they are not merely dividing but becoming incomprehensible to one another."⁴¹ This jarring relational dissonance has

⁴⁰ Whitehead and Perry, 162.

⁴¹ Timothy Dalrymple, "The Splintering of the Evangelical Soul," *Christianity Today*, April 16, 2021, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2021/april-web-only/splintering-of-evangelical-soul.html>.

come as a shock to those who were completely unaware of the fault lines. Michael Graham, executive pastor at Orlando Grace Church, notes how disturbing and disorienting it is to have one's closest relationships rearranged. He writes, "The reality is that while many in the evangelical movement thought their bonds were primarily [...] theological or missional, many of those bonds were actually political, cultural, and socioeconomic."⁴² Graham foresees the evangelical church splintering into six different ideological groups with a wide range of concerns and submits what he perceives as the issues that brought these differences into stark relief.

He explains it like this:

Over the last few decades and especially the last five years these groups have been increasingly more clear. For some, decades-old exhaustion with the Culture Wars strategy disenfranchised them. For some, five to six years of dissonance with how fellow congregants processed Trump [...] created separation. Finally, for others the separation wasn't palpable until 2020-2021 when divergence was revealed as to how people processed COVID, masks, the losses of George Floyd [...] Trump's re-election campaign, and January 6th."⁴³

Graham discusses how the issues can bubble up in any given congregation causing division that sometimes fatally wounds relationships. There are individuals who cannot fathom that Christian friends might have abstained from voting for a "pro-life" candidate for President so they conclude they cannot worship in community with them any longer. Similarly, there are those who find it inconceivable that evangelicals would be activists on any issue other than abortion. There are many disagreements over mercy, justice, and how to contextualize the gospel. He and others foresee the imminent

⁴² Michael Graham and Skylar Flowers, "The Six Way Fracturing of Evangelicalism," *Mere Orthodoxy*, June 7, 2021, <https://mereorthodoxy.com/six-way-fracturing-evangelicalism/>.

⁴³ Graham and Flowers, Graham.

possibility that churches are sorting into types because of these partisan political ideologies.

Ironically, for many Christian nationalists, religious beliefs are not tied to any specific Christian church or denomination. Their faith is individualistic, largely free of structures, rules or the approval or disapproval of church hierarchy. They have observed that institutional religion is becoming more individualized and disconnected from denominations so many choose to be part of churches led by “independent prophets” with no theological training or credentials. Biblical literacy is not a priority and religious sentiments are correlated to political behavior, demonstrated by “patriotic” activities like rallies and external symbols and signs. Christian nationalists learn to use religious language and narratives irrespective of their attachment to a religious institution. One does not need to be embedded in a church to learn the narrative of Christian nationhood. Robert Pape, a University of Chicago political scientist who has done extensive research on the events of January 6, has determined that the participants, for all their symbols, posturing and prayer, did not possess deep religious views. This, he submits, is a typical finding regarding those represented in domestic extremist movements. While they make use of the symbols and signs, there is actually an indifference to religion.

When those involved in the activities of the movement claiming to be evangelicals are questioned by researchers, forty percent say they attend church once a year or less, evidencing that they do not actually hold to evangelical beliefs and that the word itself has become a political label. As Thomas Kidd comments regarding evangelical as a descriptor, “For those who have a deeper understanding of the term’s

meaning, there can be no such thing as a non-churchgoing evangelical.”⁴⁴ Regarding church involvement of individual Christian nationalists he has interviewed Pape says, “Recruits tend to be making individual decisions about the ideologies they want to follow and even what it means. It’s very much at the level of the individual.”⁴⁵ He finds this form of religion prevalent among Christian nationalists. Adam W. Greenway, president of Southwestern Baptist Seminary, shared these sentiments and issued a warning to pastors to be on the look-out for evidence of this trend of “do it yourself” Christianity, “Pastors must help their members keep matters in perspective and avoid Lone Ranger Christianity in which they are unaccountable to fellow believers.”⁴⁶

All authors agree that this cultural moment is seeing a shift in which many Christians are sorting themselves into whatever best suits their animating political concerns. Because many Christians have assigned undeserved worth to their political identity it has taken primacy of place, making it difficult for them to restrain their need to assert their partisan ideology in every sphere, even within their churches. That their church is a place of refuge from the culture wars and serves a higher purpose that overrules partisan divides is irrelevant because it is difficult for them to imagine a place

⁴⁴ Thomas S. Kidd, “Is the Term Evangelical Redeemable?,” in *Evangelicals: Who They Have Been, Are Now, and Could Be*, eds., Mark A. Noll, David Bebbington, and George M. Marsden, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2019), 249.

⁴⁵ Robert A. Pape, “Understanding American Domestic Terrorism: Mobilization Potential and Risk Factors of a New Threat Trajectory,” Chicago Project on Security and Threats, April 6, 2021, PowerPoint Presentation, https://d3qi0qp55mx5f5.cloudfront.net/cpost/i/docs/americas_insurrectionists_online_2021_04_06.pdf?mtime=1617807009.

⁴⁶ Michelle Boorstein, “A Horn-Wearing ‘Shaman:’ A Cowboy Evangelist. For Some, the Capitol Attack Was a Kind of Christian Revolt.,” *Washington Post*, July 6, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2021/07/06/capitol-insurrection-trump-christian-nationalism-shaman/>.

where these debates do not belong. When they express their views, and find that there is an absence in the church of a shared partisan identity, mistrust and alienation from fellow Christians form.

Each Christian author issued a clarion call to pastors to be alert, aware and ready to address these issues. Despite all his research, Graham says he believes that, “God is preparing his Church to engage this age as both missional and confessional, with courage and compassion, holding onto orthodoxy, orthopraxy, and orthopathos.”⁴⁷ All note that the dangers of Christian nationalism and its quest for political power must be recognized and addressed because it is antithetical to the message of the gospel and is taking the churches it has infiltrated in a non-gospel direction. Perry and Whitehead’s final argument contends, “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.”⁴⁸

Although this phenomenon has existed in one form or another throughout the history of America, in its current manifestation it bears new and distinctive warning signs. The authors surveyed agree that evangelicals can find a way forward in unity but they must first be aware of and divorce themselves from the movement and its lust for partisan political power. There is a consensus among authors that evangelical churches have typically been effective at equipping their congregants to deal with issues involving marriage, family, education, vocation and other topics of involvement in everyday life.

⁴⁷ Graham and Flowers, Graham, “The Six Way Fracturing of Evangelicalism.”

⁴⁸ Whitehead and Perry, *Taking America Back for God*, 163.

But when it comes to politics and faithful public civic engagement, little has been done to prepare followers of Jesus to engage faithfully while not idolatrously.

Christian Nationalism's Narrative of America

Selective remembrance of what some historians refer to as America's "mythical" glorious and victorious past is another distinct characteristic of Christian nationalist narratives. Sociology researchers Alexandra Homolar and Georg Löfflman have coined the term, "populist humiliation discourse," for the way America's narrative is told within this ideology. They submit, "In populist humiliation discourse, the country of the present is described as a fundamentally weakened nation, systematically disadvantaged through 'bad deals' negotiated by the establishment and exploited by allies and enemies alike."⁴⁹ This narrative is intended to create a great deal of perceived cultural threat coupled with irrational desire for cultural resurgence of an idealized past.

It will then offer strategies by which the narrator, a partisan political figure, will be the only one who can return the nation to its former strength and glory. The authors propose that with its inordinate amount of sentimental meaning, the account creates a sense of solidarity and shared past that forges a link particularly appealing to contemporary Christian nationalist thinking.

⁴⁹ Alexandra Homolar and Georg Löfflmann, "Populism and the Affective Politics of Humiliation Narratives," *Global Studies Quarterly* 1, no. ksab002 (February 26, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksab002>.

Founding Presumption

The story of a treasured past of national greatness conveys a romanticized and often ahistorical vision of the United States. The prevailing idea is that America has lost something essential to her existence that must be regained. The dominant narrative is that America originated as a Christian nation whose founders intended for Christianity and civil society to be inextricably interwoven. This recounting effectively targets an audience for whom shared origin and destiny is crucial, and it has been extremely attractive to American evangelicals. Characterizing America's past as Christian is an oft-used justification for the culture wars that will bring about moral reform in the present. Christian nationalism perceives that whatever the cultural problems currently are, the antidote is to recover a golden age when they did not exist and America lived under the blessing of God, even though the narrative fails to mention that these periods were also often characterized by racial and ethnic prejudice, intolerance, and punitive measures against those who were perceived as peculiar or divergent from the norm. The rhetoric appeals to those drawn to what some authors have called the "nostalgia effect," i.e. a perceived better past, and even if this comfortable past did not plausibly occur, there is a constant drive to reclaim it. As David Koyzis explains it, "Christian nationalists [...] tend to judge their nation's present actions, not by transcendent norms given by God, but by precedents in their nation's history deemed to have embodied these norms."⁵⁰

The formulated belief that America is or was founded as a Christian nation is one of the movement's most seductive theories for evangelicals. It is axiomatic in Christian nationalism that America has always been uniquely favored by God as an integral part of

⁵⁰ Koyzis, *Political Visions & Illusions*, 118.

his redemptive plan. John Winthrop's sermon to the Massachusetts Bay settlers in 1630, *A Model of Christian Charity*, is often held out as a foundational document for this idea, proof that at its founding the Puritans' expectation of America was it was to be "as a city upon a hill," one the rest of the world would admire and emulate. The phrase has long been an element of Christian nationalistic discourse. Ingrained in the national subconscious of those who invoke the sermon is the idea that the country would experience unique blessings because of the covenantal relationship God would form with America, the "new Israel." The biblical references in Winthrop's sermon that were reminiscent of Moses' exhortations to the ancient Israelites have had a profound effect on the ideology of American exceptionalism through the years as many in the country developed a national understanding of themselves as heirs to God's covenantal plans for his world.

The phrase "as a city upon a hill" has become a shibboleth for the vision of the United States as the exemplar for every other society and has been adopted by politicians since the early years of the twentieth century. The reference is to Jesus' promise in the Sermon on the Mount that his followers will be like a shining city on a hill that cannot be hidden. Many American Christians have adopted the phrase as a descriptor of the American way of life and value system. There is even a colloquialism that Americans posit regarding the nation's exceptional principles and conduct. Abram C. Van Engen, professor of English at Washington University in St. Louis, explains, "...something called 'un-American' is considered wrong and everything considered wrong is called 'un-

American.”⁵¹ It is a rhetorical expression that asserts the righteousness of America and her distinctive identity and purpose. The irony of application of the phrase to the nation, which Van Engen claims is so thoroughly incorporated into its psyche is that, according to the author’s extensive research for a book about the sermon, John Winthrop was not referencing God’s plans for America as a nation. What Winthrop sketched and what the Puritan recipients would have readily understood was a vision of the disciples of Jesus Christ, living together in love and forming a godly community of the beloved people of God in a particular location, Massachusetts. They, the community of God’s people, would be “as a shining city on a hill.”

For these Protestants coming to the New World, “Israel” was always the reference point any time the people of God were called to a new place and expected to construct visible communities of love and charity. Ironically, England had once held that special recognition for them as well. In the context of the post-Reformation period with its rejection of the Catholic Church as the one true visible Church, Winthrop’s line is very significant. Van Engen explains, “Therefore, ‘city on a hill’ identified any gathering of godly Christians, wherever the light of Christ might shine. There was not one ‘city on a hill’ (the Catholic Church) but many (the gatherings of good Protestants in numerous times and places.)”⁵²

Within the highly politicized rhetoric of “a city on a hill,” however, stands one of the primary pillars of American exceptionalism, the “perpetual self-adoration” which

⁵¹ Abram C. Van Engen, *City on a Hill: A History of American Exceptionalism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020), 262.

⁵² Van Engen, *City on a Hill*, 57.

Alexis de Tocqueville observed in his decades-long reflections on America. Despite his admiration of America's democracy, Tocqueville wrote somewhat critically of an American patriotism that refused to acknowledge any national flaws. "For fifty years the inhabitants of the United States have been told repeatedly that they constitute the only people that is religious, enlightened, and free,"⁵³ he wrote in *Democracy in America*.

This unbalanced form of patriotism Tocqueville recognized is championed today by many influential voices who promulgate a story of a morally virtuous national past which must be restored. Political operative and self-proclaimed historian David Barton is a frequent guest speaker at churches whose worship services often reflect the "God and country" patriotic theme. Barton is the founder of Wallbuilders, a ministry devoted to the idea of restoring America's Christian heritage. He often equates the celebration of the Fourth of July with Christmas and claims [paraphrasing John Quincy Adams] that the birth of the Savior and the birth of America "are inextricably linked." In one address he stated, "On the Fourth of July the Founding Fathers simply took the precepts of Christ and his birth (Christmas) and incorporated those principles into civil government."⁵⁴ There is a synthesis of Christianity and patriotism in this sentiment which is totally rejected by Christian historians like Wilkens and Sanford who surmise, "...a patriotism that loses perspective and offers our highest loyalty to a specific state is an evil and destructive thing..."⁵⁵ The fusion between Christianity and the civic life of the nation

⁵³ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop, (Chicago, IL: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2002), 432.

⁵⁴ David Barton, "Independence Day: Our Christian Heritage," The Christian Broadcasting Network, September 25, 2013, <https://www1.cbn.com/independence-day-christian-heritage>.

⁵⁵ Wilkens and Sanford, *Hidden Worldviews*, 62.

which Barton proclaims affords America a transcendence that absolutizes her ideals, a distinction no nation since ancient Israel has ever merited. Even then, those transcendent ideals were never realized, much to the denigration of the people of God.

Founding Fathers

Another fundamental principle of America's romanticized past is that the founding fathers and creators of the governing documents were orthodox Christians. Since 1866, when Henry Brueckner painted "The Prayer at Valley Forge," depicting George Washington praying for his troops, there have been iconic pieces of American history held up as proofs of the Christian beliefs of founders like Washington. There are thousands of pages written to prove beyond any shadow of doubt that the most revered of the founders were Christians, even though there is extensive debate among scholars surrounding that idea. Others, including historian and Pulitzer prize-winning author of historical writings about the founders, Joseph Ellis, describes Washington as a "lukewarm Episcopalian," while author Brooke Allen concludes "there are very real doubts as to whether Washington [...] was a believer at all."⁵⁶ The dilemma is not easily resolved because many of the founders', including Washington, written references to God are in extremely vague generalities.

The Founders' Religious Beliefs

Those who argue over these inconsistencies must draw conclusions based on what others reported about these architects of the nation. For instance, although there were

⁵⁶ Brooke Allen, *Moral Minority: Our Skeptical Founding Fathers* (Chicago, IL: Ivan R. Dee, 2009), 28.

eye-witnesses to Washington's praying and attendance at church, their accounts are placed alongside acknowledgements that he stridently refused to partake of communion. In an effort to report responsibly, John Fea objectively analyzes that particular behavior, "...the refusal of Communion was not uncommon among eighteenth-century Anglicans. Historians have shown that only about 15 percent of all...Anglicans partook of the Lord's Supper."⁵⁷

John Adams, another of the founders, and a Unitarian very much concerned with the morality of the new country, was convinced that the only hope for success in the American Republic was the morality of religion. According to Fea, Adams was a "God-fearing man who should be commended by Christians for his attempt to live a life in accordance with the moral teachings of the Bible."⁵⁸ But he goes on to explain that acknowledging Adams as a Christian who thought of America as a Christian nation would mean only that Adams believed Christianity to be a moral system informed by a belief in a providential and unitary God. There is nothing written by or about Adams that would lead to the conclusion that his belief was in the God who is the Father of the Savior of the world, or that he believed in any of the other historic orthodox tenets of Christianity, such as the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Fea, along with other credible Christian historians, urges objectivity and caution when characterizing the faith of each of the founders because they were for the most part intensely private men. The information regarding their personal religious beliefs is ambiguous. One objection most of these historians have to definitively detailing the

⁵⁷ Fea, *Was America Founded as a Christian Nation?*, 185.

⁵⁸ Fea, 202.

religious lives of these very complex men is that the facts are often arbitrarily chosen and exploited to promote political and cultural agendas. When a Christian nationalist speaker or writer makes a presentation, many will produce any statement made by a founder that is even remotely, as Justin Taylor says, “positive toward religion [...] to show that they were all Christians and that they all intended the United States to be Christian.”⁵⁹ The research demonstrates that these were men who held religion in high esteem because they knew how helpful its moral code would be to the character of a fledgling nation.

Their Intent

The writers identify in American Christians a lack of knowledge of history and an uncritical acceptance of myths regarding the founders’ beliefs about God. According to Robert McKenzie, Christians should focus on where the historical record does yield a wealth of information, not in the founders’ beliefs about God but their beliefs surrounding human nature. Their writings consistently indicated not only that they understood the moral crisis taking place in the nation in the eighteenth century but that it was one of their greatest concerns regarding the success of the new republic. McKenzie explains, “By mid-1780’s they feared that the country was on the verge of ‘national humiliation,’ [...] and they were convinced that the root cause of that catastrophe was moral [...] the Founders underscored the importance of virtue so extensively in their writings because they were convinced that Americans didn’t have it.”⁶⁰ The robust and

⁵⁹ Justin Taylor, “Christian History: How David Barton Is Doing It Wrong,” The Gospel Coalition, May 12, 2017, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/evangelical-history/christian-history-why-david-barton-is-doing-it-wrong/>.

⁶⁰ McKenzie, *We the Fallen People*, 35.

coherent emphasis they placed on virtuous character was because they were confident that the republic could not be sustained without it.

A careful reading of the documents reveals the parallels with the circumstances of the age in which they were written. A close examination discloses that they are heavily shaped by enlightenment philosophy, the harmonizing of Greek philosophers – in particular Aristotle – and the Roman jurists of antiquity, the true founders of the “natural law” tradition of the founding documents’ language. The ideology of natural law and natural rights were foundational to the writings. Every principle in them flows from the theory that all men are equally born with certain inherent or inalienable rights. However, the framers viewed individual rights as inextricably linked with individual duties and responsibilities that would contribute to the “general welfare” or common good of the society. The general welfare of the society would never override individual rights, but it would most assuredly define their limitations. The common good of this new society, the framers believed, was the preeminent concern, not that of the individual. However, they were convinced it would be the effects of the individual exercising his rights responsibly that would reverberate out to contribute to the welfare of the entire country. The nation did not belong to an individual claiming his “rights” but was a treasured inheritance possessed by all who were citizens of it. Andrew L. Seidel, a constitutional attorney and author, calls attention to much of the language of the documents which forms the context of this, “We the people,” the “will of the people,” and “government by the people,” are a few of the phrases which underscore the collective nature of the framers’ emphasis.

Seidel also clarifies some of the false claims of the current nationalist narrative that the documents were based on particular biblical precepts. One such assertion is that

the concept for the three branches of American government comes from Isaiah 33:22, which says “For the Lord is our judge; the Lord is our lawgiver; the Lord is our king; he will save us.” Seidel reports, “This passage concludes with the Lord’s plans to reveal worldwide sovereignty [...] it is not about a tripartite separation of powers but about [...] concentrating power in one being, Yahweh.”⁶¹

The irony of the premise of the Isaiah model, upon which many Christian nationalists insist, is that there are available documents written in the founders’ own hands that establish their complete rejection of the doctrine of the Trinity. In reality, the principle source of the theory of the separation of powers was a French enlightenment philosopher by the name of Montesquieu who wrote *The Spirit of the Laws*, in which he details a model dividing government into three separate but equal branches of power.⁶² In “Federalist 47,” of *The Federalist Papers*, James Madison expresses great admiration for Montesquieu and his political theory which gave the founders the idea for the three separate but equal branches. Madison writes, “No political truth is of greater intrinsic value or is stamped with the authority of more enlightened patrons of liberty.”⁶³ Despite a lack of demonstrable evidence and many written statements to the contrary, the narrative that has taken shape within Christian nationalism is that the founding fathers were devout Christians who used the Bible and their orthodox faith to construct the documents that would guide a distinctly Christian nation. Although there are verifiable documents

⁶¹ Andrew L. Seidel, *The Founding Myth: Why Christian Nationalism Is Un-American* (New York: Sterling, 2019), 113.

⁶² Charles Montesquieu, *Spirit of the Laws*. trans., Thomas Nugent (N.p.: Digireads.com publishing, 2020), 160-167.

⁶³ Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay, *The Federalist Papers* (Edinburg: Black and White Publications, 2015), 149.

repudiating this claim for most of the framers, objective Christian historians point out that there were a few who did fully embrace the orthodox doctrines of Christianity. John Witherspoon, John Jay, and Samuel Adams were men whose faith consistently informed their politics. “In the end,” offers Fea, “a close look at the beliefs of these statesmen reminds us that Christianity was present at the time of the American founding but it was often merged with other ideas.”⁶⁴ The authors whose works are reviewed here agree that the founding principles were as compatible and influenced by enlightenment, humanist ideas as they were with Christianity.

The historians agree that the proper way for American Christians to honor the founding documents and their authors is to reflect seriously on the framers’ actual intent and objectives. These thoughtful men viewed the legacy they were bequeathing the citizens of the United States as anchoring all Americans, not just those of a particular religion, in the blessings of liberty that the documents promised. It was their desire that what came from this synthesis of ideas would be a balance of individual rights and popular sovereignty brought about by a separation of powers. Their aspiration was that this “more perfect union” would be preserved as a uniquely American tradition, not a uniquely Christian one.

National Destiny

Not only does Christian nationalism give exaggerated transcendent meaning to the history of America’s past, the nation’s future role is frequently framed in millennial or apocalyptic language. Its political arguments consistently target the evil that is believed

⁶⁴ Fea, *Was America Founded as a Christian Nation?*, 242.

to be destabilizing society and preventing the blessings of God. The strategy then becomes one of turning every cultural issue into an attack on biblical values against which war can be waged and the kingdom of God brought closer to being realized when that particular battle is won. According to Sanford and Wilkens, it would be unthinkable to the Christian nationalist that the United States would not play an all-important role in the end-times blessings since “God’s ultimate plan for all nations is inextricably bound up with the fate of the United States.”⁶⁵ If America is to be the last great bastion of goodness, she must rid herself of all the cultural perversity that taints the nation and keeps her from achieving security. The existential fear that depravity is winning is the impetus for the war of good versus evil in which Christian nationalists see themselves engaged. The politics of reassurance that Christian nationalists offer is that they alone are equipped to recapture the “moral” past of the nation.

Christian Nationalism’s Penchant for a Warrior Leader

Many American Christians in this current cultural moment demonstrate a lack of discriminating criteria for a responsible, healthy leader. Jesus’ constant refrain of selfless, sacrificial service on behalf of others has been abandoned in favor of vitriolic attempts to over-power opposition and coerce concession. The amplification and valorization of cruelty stands in stark opposition to the explicit exhortations of the apostle Paul to the Philippian Christians to deal with each other in the same manner which characterized the Lord Jesus. Humility, kindness, and civility were to be paradigmatic for Christians

⁶⁵ Steve Wilkens and Mark L. Sanford, *Hidden Worldviews: Eight Cultural Stories That Shape Our Lives* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 67.

aspiring to engage the world with a faithful and active Christian presence, one that would actually have an influence in the culture.

However, as author and professor of history at Calvin University Kristin Du Mez observes, the Jesus of Christian nationalism is not only malleable but easily disentangled from the truths of scripture. Du Mez asks, “When evangelicals define themselves in terms of Christ’s atonement or as disciples of a risen Christ, what sort of Jesus are they imagining?”⁶⁶ Her premise is that against all biblical assertion to the contrary, they are conceptualizing a rugged masculinity in an American “John Wayne” type of ideal man. The political leader that these evangelicals desire to embrace to advance their agenda is aggressive, militant, invincible, “a man who wasn’t afraid to resort to violence to bring order, who protected those deemed worthy of protection [...] a warrior in the tradition of [...] William Wallace.”⁶⁷ In agreement with Du Mez, Thomas Kidd affirms that since Christian nationalists believe in the complete vulnerability and fragility of Christian values, it is only pugilistic, authoritarian types of politicians who can save them. Especially since the beginning of the Cold War, political leaders proving themselves to be political Christian warriors on the side of embattled Christian values must have the qualifications to militantly advance a Christian future for America. It is an atmosphere in which Christians think that “desperate times call for desperate measures” and they are willing to jettison the fruit of the Spirit the Bible mandates must characterize the people of God in order to win at all costs the battles led by a “strongman.” In this framework,

⁶⁶ Kristin Kobes Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2020), 5

⁶⁷ Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne*, 271.

there is no place for an individual who exhibits kindness and missional, gospel-centered leadership.

According to Thomas Kidd, in the past few decades it has become less and less important to Christians if the politician actually held to Christian values. He explains, “The details of a politician’s personal faith didn’t matter so much as their bona fides as a Cold War stalwart. This association of Republican politicians with the causes of Christian nationalism became more pronounced when the GOP, out of both opportunism and principle, identified itself as the pro-life party”⁶⁸ Kidd reports that prior to the Supreme Court case of *Roe vs. Wade* in 1973, abortion had never been of particular interest to Republicans or evangelicals. In the years leading up to that landmark Supreme Court decision some Republican governors, including Ronald Reagan and Nelson Rockefeller, were even instrumental in liberalizing their states’ abortion laws.

As historian John Fea puts it, “Most evangelicals thought abortion was morally suspect but thought of opposition [...] as a distinctly Catholic cause.”⁶⁹ It wasn’t until 1979, six years after *Roe* was decided, that conservative political activist Paul Weyrich and several others adopted abortion as a call to arms for evangelicals. Weyrich had always been a firm believer in the possibility that if political power could be achieved by Christians at the ballot box, America could be returned to her former moral greatness. Randall Balmer, author and professor of religion at Dartmouth College, writes that for two decades Weyrich tried to unite evangelical voters into a political voting bloc. However, what Christian writers often fail to mention is that his most notable endeavors

⁶⁸ Kidd, “Christian Nationalism vs. Christian Patriotism.”

⁶⁹ Fea, *Was America Founded as a Christian Nation?*, 54.

had been in aggressive attempts to retain segregation in Christian institutions like Bob Jones University and Jerry Falwell's Lynchburg Christian School. When the courts determined in 1970 that racially discriminatory private schools would no longer be entitled to federal tax exemption status and persons making donations to those schools would not be entitled to deductions, Weyrich thought there might be an opening to unite Christians into the voting bloc for which he had expended so much effort. However, because the civil rights movement was making some inroads, protecting the segregation of Christian schools was not a palatable cause for many evangelical voters. It was the moral crusade against abortion that proved to be the catalyst needed for evangelicals to enter the political arena. They would now be the primary vehicle of the Republican party's ideas. Although the political activists of what would be called the "Moral Majority" would fight issues like gay rights, pornography, school busing, and threats to religious institutions, it would be abortion that would most motivate and connect them. The rhetoric of battle which began to be used paralleled Weyrich's agreement with the philosophy of his contemporary war hero General Douglas MacArthur that nothing but winning was acceptable.

By 1979, the group that had been initially organized to perpetuate policies of racial exclusion in private schools had galvanized evangelicals into a voting bloc in which virulent opposition to abortion would be the foremost political issue championed. The tactics of this combat would be aggressive and if one did not vote for the pro-life candidate, one could hardly call himself an evangelical. In commenting on the change in development Balmer points out, "The logical, unfortunate, even tragic corollary to this partisan dualism is single-issue voting. Rather than evaluate on policies or platforms, too

many citizens (on both sides of the issue) decided to cast their votes solely on the basis of abortion.”⁷⁰ It was no longer important if a candidate was a person of principle or character or even what their policies were on many other important issues regarding the flourishing of individual lives, they were assured of evangelical support if they lined up on the right side of the abortion issue. Nor did it matter if the candidate had ever adopted anti-abortion causes in the past or even that they embraced pro-life issues from the heart in the present. It only mattered that one was willing to emphatically profess fealty in the current moment in order to prevail in an election, even if it meant reversing position from one previously and even very recently held. The writers examined have concluded that the most important criterion for a potential Christian candidate is a willingness to be the toughest in vilifying the other side of a culture war issue no matter what his own moral convictions are on abortion or any other issue.

To procure that candidate and portray his or her credibility and soundness for office, promoters will often go to great lengths to establish any candidate as a follower of Jesus, despite all evidence to the contrary. Kidd cites as an example, “evangelical Republican insiders declaring that Donald Trump is a ‘baby Christian’ who sometimes just engages in ‘macho’ or ‘locker-room’ talk. The urge to transform politicians [...] into virtuous believers or Christ-like figures suggests that we have confused nationalism with biblical Christianity.”⁷¹

⁷⁰ Randall Herbert Balmer, *Bad Faith: Race and the Rise of the Religious Right* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2021), 84.

⁷¹ Kidd, “Christian Nationalism vs. Christian Patriotism.”

Another example of this effort to sell a candidate to evangelicals is when political leaders frame the candidate by placing him within a particular Biblical story, such as that of the ancient Persian King Cyrus, who allowed the captive Israelites to return to Jerusalem after the exile. The comparison establishes a compelling narrative that is appealing to evangelicals. Promoters need not justify a controversial past, explain away sexual misconduct or any other immorality; all they need do is proclaim that the validity of the candidate is demonstrated by this particular biblical paradigm, no matter how unfamiliar the candidate might be with the exemplar. If they can claim that God arranged the candidacy, that is legitimization no matter how corrupt or immoral the candidate may be. John Fea, in an interview with Tara Isabella Burton, says, “It’s the theo-political version of money laundering, taking Scripture to [...] clean up your candidate.”⁷² And for the Christian nationalist, if there is a strong, authoritarian candidate who can brandish whatever metaphorical sword is necessary to annihilate enemies, the ends justify the means.

According to Wheaton College history professor and author, Robert T. McKenzie, the biblical responsibility of the Christian is just not that simple. McKenzie asserts that Christians reveal more about their pragmatism than their faith when they align themselves with candidates of disreputable character. He exhorts followers of Christ, “The reality is that every transaction comes embedded with testimony, a host of messages [...] about our God. Rather than focusing on political outcomes, we should be asking ourselves constantly, ‘What is the vote I am casting [...] proclaiming about what it means

⁷² Tara Isabella Burton, “The Biblical Story the Christian Right Uses to Defend Trump,” Vox, March 5, 2018, <https://www.vox.com/identities/2018/3/5/16796892/trump-cyrus-christian-right-bible-cbn-evangelical-propaganda>.

to follow Jesus, about the nature of the gospel?”⁷³ McKenzie is overt in his criticism of Christians who willingly sanctify alliances with any candidate who will make the right political promises and rebukes those who have “foolishly sought to usher in a kingdom not of this world by using tools that are of this world.”⁷⁴ He is adamant that when Christians do this, they are proclaiming to the world that the body of Christ is just another political interest group “expediently preaching the importance of character only when it helps us and hurts the other side.”⁷⁵

The entire narrative of the Bible inveighs against any action that would subvert the identity of the people of God and their distinctive calling. It is therefore, according to political scientist, David Koyzis, incumbent upon Christians to be able to recognize the identity markers of this form of idolatry and reject them. Koyzis asserts, “There is some irony in the fact that many Christians, who are otherwise able to see through the pretensions of liberalism and socialism, are nevertheless the first to jump on the ‘God and country’ bandwagon.”⁷⁶ The reason for this willing embrace, he argues, is a tendency for Christians to fall prey to a thorough biblical distortion of the character of Christ and his purposes for his people and his kingdom.

According to a recent essay by David French, cultural and political commentator, there is no end to the crippling and inestimable harm done to the cause of Christ by this

⁷³ Robert Tracy McKenzie, *We the Fallen People: The Founders and the Future of American Democracy* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2021), 269.

⁷⁴ McKenzie, 271.

⁷⁵ McKenzie, 271.

⁷⁶ David Theodore Koyzis, *Political Visions & Illusions: A Survey & Christian Critique of Contemporary Ideologies*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019), 114.

aspect of this ideological movement. He explains that the damage is on display at this very moment on the international stage as Vladimir Putin, a man who has been praised by evangelical leaders such as Franklin Graham as a defender of “traditional Christianity,” engages in an aggressive war against a neighboring country with the full endorsement of the Russian Orthodox Church. Because the Church in Moscow identifies western culture as degenerate and worthy of destruction, it is more than satisfied to use authoritarian civil leadership as a tool for domination while simultaneously being used itself by the state. As French posits, “This is the church at its worst, when it weds itself to state power and wields the sword to advance [...] God’s kingdom on earth. We are watching the deep darkness of malevolent Christendom, a religious movement that will slaughter innocents to fight ‘decadence.’”⁷⁷ Unfortunately, French believes there is a percentage of American Christians who see the collaboration and synergy of the powerful Russian church and state as a paradigm for how Christianity should function.

Katherine Stewart, a journalist and author whose research has resulted in essays and books on this topic, examines richly funded partnerships like the World Congress of Families, comprised of Russian and American Christians who come together to discuss issues of mutual interest. Its members meet annually to praise “Putin’s Russia and the Orthodox Church as defenders of ‘Christian civilization’ against a secular, decadent West.”⁷⁸ In agreement with many of Stewart’s conclusions, the authors surveyed say that American Christians must reject this type of nationalist thinking. They believe that this

⁷⁷ David French, “The Best of Christian Compassion, the Worst of Religious Power,” *The Dispatch*, March 3, 2022, <https://frenchpress.thedispatch.com/p/the-best-of-christian-compassion>.

⁷⁸ Katherine Stewart, *The Power Worshipers: Inside the Dangerous Rise of Religious Nationalism* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020), 254.

ethos sabotages the truth about the kingdom of God and appends itself to politically expedient evil to bring about a Christendom that is completely inconsistent with Christianity, and for which there is no theological defense. They agree that the argument of pragmatism or instrumentalism regarding an immoral politician who “gets things done,” should never be a component of the Christian’s decision making.

Biblically, a healthy Christian community will honor those leaders who embody the values which reflect God’s character, those whom God holds in esteem. Throughout scripture a well-functioning community of the people of God demonstrates how and to whom to afford honor. The bestowing of it on the deserving becomes one of the demonstrable functions of the robust people of God living in accord with his values even amid pernicious enemies. Conversely, when malevolent leaders are exposed in the biblical narrative, they are publically and decisively shamed and the people of God are in whole-hearted agreement with that assessment. When a king like Manasseh is evil and idolatrous, his sins are publicized and “all that he did” is divulged in the “Book of the Chronicles of the Kings of Judah,” according to 2 Kings 21:17.

It is axiomatic in scripture that not only is recognition of evil expected of God’s people, subsequent avoidance of the evil-doer is also necessary. When power was being offered to the evangelical church by an American politician who believed and stated that he alone could deliver what the nation and the church needed, Robert McKenzie commented, “To say these words and believe them is the height of hubris. To hear these words and believe them is the epitome of idolatry. They should evoke horror – not applause.”⁷⁹

⁷⁹ McKenzie, *We the Fallen People*, 273-274.

Scripture has always given the people of God specific criteria to assess leaders who model appropriate standards of behaviour. It has also assigned responsibility to avoid toxic leaders who exhibit antisocial personality traits like predisposition toward unnecessary conflict. Because political leaders in the nationalistic movement are very much aware that many Christians today see themselves as members of the most oppressed group in America, these types of politicians work diligently to cultivate that sense of persecution, tapping into Christians' feelings of fear and victimization. For example, as Stewart reports, "Among leaders of the movement, it is a matter of routine to hear talk that they are engaged in a 'battle against tyranny,' and that the Bible may soon be outlawed,"⁸⁰ despite any evidence of the reality of this type of claim.

Political leaders of nationalistic movements are very much aware that the Church has been a key access to their pathway to power and they will exploit those who are willing to cast aside their biblical moorings regarding character in leadership. Authoritarian leaders use crisis rhetoric to play on fears of unfairness, moral disintegration, and destructive enemies at the gate. With this strategy, they create unwarranted blind and irrevocable trust in themselves as the only solution to the life and death struggle to save the imperilled nation. It appears to be working as Jonathan Haidt in his latest article concludes, "The [...] most recent international measure of citizens' trust in government, business, media, and [NGO's] showed stable and competent autocracies

⁸⁰ Katherine Stewart, "Christian Nationalism Is One of Trump's Most Powerful Weapons," *The New York Times*, January 6, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/06/opinion/jan-6-christian-nationalism.html>.

[...]at the top of the list, while contentious democracies such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Spain, and South Korea scored near the bottom.”⁸¹

To add to these findings is a 2019 study by Yale political scientist Milan W. Svobik which reports, “In sharply polarized electorates, even voters who value democracy will be willing to sacrifice [...] for the sake of electing politicians who champion their interests. When punishing a leader’s authoritarian tendencies requires voting for a platform, party, or person that his supporters detest, many will find this too high a price to pay.”⁸² Recent history has shown that evangelical sycophancy is easily captured when insecure Christians are assured that they will have an earthly “savior” to defeat the cultural enemies in a rapidly secularizing society. Even though Christians should be capable of biblically distinguishing honorable leaders, the “savior factor” is undermining sound decision-making within the Christian electorate. To achieve their political goals, evangelicals have now intimately aligned themselves with a non-religious conservative demographic that does not share the same moral commitment as their devoutly Christian partners. In an uneasy alliance like this, true followers of Christ are often at odds with its ethos and are being forced to decide how much they are willing to concede in order to gain political “wins.”

⁸¹ Jonathan Haidt, “Why the Past 10 Years of American Life Have Been Uniquely Stupid,” *The Atlantic*, April 11, 2022, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2022/05/social-media-democracy-trust-babel/629369/>.

⁸² Milan W. Svobik, “Polarization versus Democracy,” *Journal of Democracy* 30, no. 3 (2019): 20–32, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2019.0039>.

Summary of Political Identity Markers of Christian Nationalism

There is no doubt in the minds of these authors that true patriotism, love and loyalty to one's homeland is a good thing. There is also no doubt that America is worthy of that admiration. It is a nation built on ideas that have long been paradigmatic for the Western world, freedom, democracy, and a commitment to religious liberties among others. But Christian nationalism is not about patriotism. Jill LePore, the David Woods Kemper Professor of American History at Harvard, explains, "Nationalists pretend their aims are [...] protection and unity and that their motivation is patriotism. This is a lie. Patriotism is animated by love, nationalism by hatred."⁸³ When C.S. Lewis taught Christians about love of their homeland he stressed that they are not to believe a fanciful history of their nation but to conserve the good and learn the lessons of the bad. Proper patriotism does not idolize nor demonize the past.⁸⁴ The understanding of patriotism shared by these authors is loyalty to the framers' constitutional ideals, democratic institutions, and citizenship that help Christians appreciate and appropriate their place in a particular country for its welfare. Paul D. Miller explains patriotism in the context of the creation mandate: "Our affection and loyalty to a specific part of God's creation helps us do the good work of cultivating and improving the part we happen to live in."⁸⁵

But when those who would be the arbiters of who is and is not a true American deem everyone outside of a particular political party un-American, true patriotism has

⁸³ Jill Lepore, *This America: The Case for the Nation*, (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2019), 22-24.

⁸⁴ C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*, (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2017).

⁸⁵ Miller, "What Is Christian Nationalism?"

been morphed into idolatry. These researchers, essayists, and authors have provided a strong lens through which to focus on the identity markers of Christian nationalism. It is clear they have observed a conflation of tenets that were never meant to be fused with Christianity. Each author has emphasized different aspects of what currently confuses the Christian's thinking. Some have focused on the prioritization of a nation above all else, despite scripture's explicit exhortation to exalt God's kingdom first. Others observed the extremes of the movement that have made violence an expression of freedom, as seen at the Capitol on January 6, 2021, in an interspersed of anti-Semitic graphics with Christian symbols and rituals, along with "A wooden cross [...] erected not far from a wooden gallows to stop an election and allegedly "save a nation."⁸⁶ Others have concentrated on the ahistorical narratives of both the former grandeur and future glory of America's mythical "Israel-like" relationship with God.

Whatever the particular emphasis, the consensus is that Christians who have been caught up in the ideology of Christian nationalism have submitted to idols and are showing visible symptoms of a society that is, according to Christopher Wright, "...in deep and possibly irreversible trouble."⁸⁷ They agree there is much that needs to be done by the Church to restore a thick Christian identity so that it cannot be penetrated or subsumed by these characteristics of Christian nationalism.

⁸⁶ David French, "Discerning the Difference Between Christian Nationalism and Christian Patriotism," *The Dispatch*, January 31, 2021, <https://frenchpress.thedispatch.com/p/discerning-the-difference-between>.

⁸⁷ Wright, *Here Are Your Gods*, 107.

Correlation of Information Illiteracy with Christian Nationalism

Recent studies by social scientists reveal that nothing is more corrosive to trust in both institutions and individuals than the current online ecosystem. Nothing has given more of a voice and platform to the extremes of ideologies or caused more fragmentation of society than social media. And yet again and again the Bible exhorts the people of God to cultivate discernment as a primary marker of their Christian identity.

The kind of renewal of the mind to which Paul refers in Romans 12:1-2 requires responsible, critical thinking capable of raising fundamental questions about the assumptions promoted by any information source. Scripture consistently issues a clarion call to God's people to evaluate all non-credentialed data to consider the ways it is inconsistent with objective, verifiable truth. A Christian's practice of critically appraising incoming information is indispensable to an awareness of his own tendency to think badly or to not really think at all.

Instead of the difficult work of critical thinking, however, individuals incline to what Distinguished Professor of Literature at Baylor, Alan Jacobs, calls "an instinct for consensus." It is a perspective, says Jacobs, that promotes investment "in not knowing, not thinking about things to [...] share an attitude one knows is socially approved."⁸⁸ People want to be on a "team" that shares their moral narrative. Once they have been accepted they bind themselves to the team and as Jonathan Haidt says, blind themselves to the ideas of any "out-group." Relevant to this cultural moment of social media proliferation and extremely partisan news sources, Jacobs adds, "That instinct for

⁸⁸ Alan Jacobs, *How to Think: A Survival Guide for a World at Odds* (New York: Currency, 2017), 23.

consensus is magnified and intensified [...] because we deal daily with a wild torrent of what claims to be information but is often nonsense.”⁸⁹ Confirmation bias, the tendency of people to pursue information sources that confirm their already sanctioned presuppositions, means that they will search out evidence for even the most absurd beliefs and conspiracies which they have already endorsed as truth. For example, highly conspiratorial thinkers typically believe that their lives are being controlled by secret plots originating from a minority of people not known to the general population.

Our current technological age has made it possible for the internet to become a primary source of promotion of anti-intellectualism, advancing and augmenting bizarre and false messaging to which Christians are capitulating. As Gospel Coalition editor Joe Carter has reported, “You can hardly open Facebook without seeing a Christian [...] who has posted claims they cannot possibly know to be true. Much needs to be said about why so many followers of Christ are spreading misinformation. But we don’t need a sophisticated sociological analysis before we can denounce such slander as sinful.”⁹⁰

Carter is basing his evaluation on the scriptural evidence. In the pastoral epistles written by Paul to those who would succeed him in ministry, one of the predominant exhortations was in 1 Timothy 1:3-4,7, “...charge certain persons...not to devote themselves to myths...” and “have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths.” The exhortation of 1 Timothy 6:4-5 exposes to Timothy those who “have an unhealthy craving for controversy [...] which produce envy, dissension, slander, evil suspicions,

⁸⁹ Jacobs. 22.

⁹⁰ Joe Carter, “Christians Are Not Immune to Conspiracy Theories,” The Gospel Coalition, May 8, 2020, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/christians-conspiracy-theories/>.

and constant friction among people who are deprived in mind and deprived of the truth.” It is impossible to overstate the importance that the Bible places on the Christian’s responsibility for wisdom, information literacy, and excellence in both thinking and communicating.

Commenting on the way in which information illiteracy actually begins to impair a person’s mental health, Donald Guthrie says of the Timothy passages, “This is a noteworthy example of the processes by which intellectual wrangling so often ends in moral deterioration [...] the mind becomes robbed of the truth.”⁹¹ Scripture is abundantly clear that the people of God are to live in wisdom, challenging false information structures which oppose biblical truth and create controversies in the mind. It is the mind, the apostle Paul says in Romans 12:2, that must be continuously renewed so that it will have the ability to test and approve, to “discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.” Contrarily, in this current cultural moment of social media and extreme political partisanship, it is not the approval of God but that of the social group to which one belongs that takes primacy of place.

The disconnecting and confusing disinformation found nowhere else to the extent it is found online inflicts pain and cultivates fear and rage. In Jonathan Haidt’s latest contribution he has identified “at least three major forces that collectively bind together successful democracies: social capital (extensive social networks with high levels of trust), strong institutions, and shared stories. Social media has weakened all three.”⁹²

⁹¹ Donald Guthrie, *The Pastoral Epistles: An Introduction and Commentary*, 2nd ed, The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries 14 (Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press, 1990), 126-127.

⁹² Jonathan Haidt, “Why the Past 10 Years of American Life Have Been Uniquely Stupid,” *The Atlantic*, April 11, 2022, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2022/05/social-media-democracy-trust-babel/629369/>.

But Proverbs 2:10-12 promises that if God's people will listen to and store up these words, "wisdom will come into your heart and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul; discretion will watch over you, understanding will guard you, delivering you from the way of evil, from men of perverted speech." The preponderance of biblical evidence witnesses to the truth that Christians have been given all they need to combat information illiteracy.

The Power of Sheer Animus

Conspiracy theories and disinformation bind people together in like-mindedness or "in-groups" while at the same time blinding them to much of the reality that would serve as a check on faulty biases. Hans Georg Gadamer, a German philosopher and author has said, "One of the key tasks of critical reflection is to distinguish the true prejudices by which we understand from the false ones by which we misunderstand."⁹³ This becomes difficult to do once beliefs have been accepted or rejected by the "in-group" to which one belongs and individuals have become so entrenched in the group they are unable to even acknowledge that facts might be false or possibly have changed. Alan Jacobs likens this to the economics term "sunk costs," in which investments have become so excessive that they cannot be recovered and the investors response is to double down. He explains, "The more people have invested in a particular project, the more reluctant they are to abandon it, no matter how strong the evidence indicating that it's a lost cause [...] there is an inordinate influence on decision-making. Poker players

⁹³ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 298.

who have bet heavily on a hand don't want to fold and lose it – even though sticking [...] is likely to result in further losses.”⁹⁴

This rigidity of thinking often generates an idea of victimhood, condescension and defiance. A noticeable characteristic of the phenomenon is that even though teammates in a tribe or in-group are usually made up of people who were already drawn to each other, the online communities' strong coalitions can even be formed by people who typically dislike each other if they discover the common cause of defeating enemies. Once group members begin to think in terms of team players and traitors, it becomes more and more difficult for them to think of those who disagree as intelligent or even decent human beings. The outsiders become toxically suspicious. They become, to borrow a moniker from award-winning author Susan Friend Harding, the “Repugnant Cultural Other.”⁹⁵ Everyone, she says, in an antagonistic community has a “Repugnant Cultural Other.” As social scientist Stephen Hawkins of the “Hidden Tribes” project explains, “Fueled by a culture of outrage, the other side can no longer be tolerated, and no price is too high to defeat them.”⁹⁶

The Christian authors agree that this is an extremely incongruous position in which Christians are finding themselves. It not only keeps them from loving their neighbors, it keeps them from even recognizing fellow image bearers of God as neighbors. As Jacobs points out, “If I'm consumed by this belief that that person over

⁹⁴ Jacobs, *How to Think*. 129.

⁹⁵ Susan Friend Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 373.

⁹⁶ Stephen Hawkins et al., “Hidden Tribes: A Study of America's Polarized Landscape” (PsyArXiv, August 21, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.31234/osf.io/xz25v>.

there is both “Other” and “Repugnant,” I may never discover that my favorite television program is also his favorite television program; that we like some of the same books [...] that we both know what it’s like to nurse someone through illness.”⁹⁷ This is just one example of the way social media has contributed to the weakening of relationships and even prohibited their potential to form.

When Christians develop idolatrous relationships with political, social or cultural power, the group into which they have been absorbed can easily form a cohort that is cruel and dangerous. As the group becomes more and more extreme, it becomes progressively convinced of its role as eradicator of all adversaries. Research from social scientists Shanto Iyengar and Sean J. Westwood, indicates that “Americans today do not simply *feel* animus toward those who disagree with them politically; they are increasingly prepared to *act* on it.”⁹⁸ Every day Americans are bombarded with endless “us versus them” stories about some political out-group which needs to be eradicated. In commenting on the ways in which these stories are designed to manipulate emotions Robert McKenzie says, “The details may vary but the plot line is simple and repetitive: our lives would be better off if not for ‘Them.’ [...] as when a commentator warns that ‘the worst people in our society have taken control of America and [...] are tearing it down’.”⁹⁹ The implication is that every problem in the country would be solved if the right political party was in power. Prevalent in this thinking is the ancient form of

⁹⁷ Jacobs, *How to Think*. 27.

⁹⁸ Shanto Iyengar and Sean J. Westwood, “Fear and Loathing Across Party Lines: New Evidence on Group Polarization,” *American Journal of Political Science* 59, no. 3 (2015): 690–707, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12152>.

⁹⁹ McKenzie, *We the Fallen People*, 277.

Manichaeism, the positing of a universe divided between the forces of two deities, one good and one evil. The presupposition of course, is that it is always one's own group that is good while the other is evil. One of the consequences of this type of thinking for the Christian is the attempt to avoid external sinful influences because the evil is always somewhere "out there," and never seen as a heart problem or captivity to sin for anyone in the in-group. The evil is always only characteristic of the "repugnant other."

The potent mix of grievance, misguided patriotism, and religious fervor among Christian nationalists has allowed them to long tolerate and now applaud far-right extremism and the stoking of violence. No small percentage of Christian nationalist leaning thinkers believe that violence may be necessary to "save the country." The political and faulty theological underpinnings of the movement have deeply infiltrated conservative Christian circles with all types of animus-motivating disinformation. When partisan narratives are perniciously woven they poison minds and fuel rage. David French describes the consequences of the disinformation saying, "They not only dramatically exaggerate the stakes of our political and legal disputes, they dramatically exaggerate the perfidy of your opponents. Moreover, when the stakes are deemed to be that high, the moral limitations on your response start to fall away."¹⁰⁰ The authors agree that their research demonstrates that in the past several years, there are many who have allowed the "moral limitations" on their response to fall away.

Decades ago, C.S Lewis talked about the "draw" of *The Inner Ring*, the in-group with the ability to completely corrupt an individual's thinking and behavior once he has

¹⁰⁰ David French, "Only the Church Can Truly Defeat a Christian Insurrection," *The Dispatch*, January 10, 2021, <https://frenchpress.thedispatch.com/p/only-the-church-can-truly-defeat>.

been admitted to the group. He described it like this: “And then [...] next week it will be something a little further from the rules, and next [...] further still [...] It may end in a crash, a scandal [...] But you will be a scoundrel [...] Of all passions the passion for the Inner Ring is most skillful in making a man who is not yet a very bad man do very bad things.”¹⁰¹ Lewis was corroborating with his pre-internet characterization what these contemporary examiners are observing explicitly in the way online communities incline toward extremism. Although there are some members of a group who are able to ascertain when an environment has become so toxic it requires a departure, there are also many who will not abandon the connections they have forged there. By staying, they then become completely committed to and identified with the group, growing increasingly extreme in their behavior.

In 1999, University of Chicago law professor Cass Sunstein wrote an academic paper which echoes some of the elements of Lewis’ salient points. It is entitled *The Law of Group Polarization*, in which he describes the tendency of people who come into a group with a preconceived bias toward an extreme view. Sunstein identifies a “cascade effect,” a rapid escalation of the extremism within the group when individuals engage in repeated discussions of certain views, “deliberations over time [...] produce a situation in which individuals hold positions more extreme than those of any individual member before the series of deliberation began.”¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*, (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 154.

¹⁰² Cass R. Sunstein, “The Law of Group Polarization,” University of Chicago Law School, John M. Olin Program in Law and Economics Working Paper No. 91 (1999). <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.199668>.

The above mentioned Hidden Tribes project is a study in how the outrage experienced in this cultural moment is not only poisoning political discourse and personal relationships, but has become increasingly physically dangerous as well. The project notes that debates about all “contested issues from immigration and trade to economic management, climate change and national security, become shaped by larger tribal identities. Polarization and tribalism are self-reinforcing and will likely continue to accelerate.”¹⁰³

The Power of Words as Weapons

Over 40 years ago, renowned philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre wrote, “The most striking feature of contemporary moral utterance is that so much of it is used to express disagreements.”¹⁰⁴ It is unlikely that MacIntyre, even with his penchant for cultural imagination, would have ever envisioned the current social media milieu’s explosive anger. Even though this proclivity to factions and contentions was addressed politically and culturally in the United States as far back as the founding documents in the warnings of James Madison and Thomas Jefferson, social media has magnified the passions beyond what the founders could have ever dreamed. Complex studies currently demonstrate that there is no other medium as effective in amplifying vitriolic polarization.

¹⁰³ Hawkins et al., “Hidden Tribes.”

¹⁰⁴ Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 6.

As stated above, research shows that it is also extremely corrosive to peoples' trust in institutions. To give a current example, every day social media gives parents more opportunities to become outraged over what they anticipate might be happening in the institutions entrusted with their childrens' education. When a national cultural issue is brought to the forefront of social discourse, parents across the country automatically assume it is by necessity also threatening on a local level, whether or not there is any evidence of that. If there is any hint of a perceived pedagogical shift, teachers, administrators and school boards' motives come under the scrutiny of angry parents, often followed by overreaching reforms and subsequent firings or reassignments. In his recent article, Haidt points out, "When people lose trust in institutions, they lose trust in the stories told by those institutions."¹⁰⁵ It is difficult for the institution to then regain trust because it is impossible for it to speak more loudly or authoritatively than the convincing online disinformation sources.

Haidt continues in this piece to explain the amplification of rage that social media generates. He maintains that the platforms are "almost perfectly designed to bring out our most moralistic and least reflective selves. The volume of outrage [...] shocking."¹⁰⁶ He references an engineer at Twitter who had been a part of the team that invented the "retweet" button. The engineer later regretted the work because it had contributed so much to the viciousness of the atmosphere. He said it was "like putting a loaded gun in the hands of a four-year-old."¹⁰⁷ He pointed out that Twitter wars now erupt over topics

¹⁰⁵ Haidt, "Why the Past 10 Years of American Life Have Been Uniquely Stupid," April 11, 2022.

¹⁰⁶ Haidt.

¹⁰⁷ Haidt, "Why the Past 10 Years of American Life Have Been Uniquely Stupid," April 11, 2022.

as frivolous as criticism of a dress worn by a female politician to attacks on Big Bird for advocating vaccines. It is a social media platform, like so many others, that facilitates angry encounters between people who have never even met each other. The authors surveyed agreed that the social media ecosystem contributes to the disequilibrium of the society like nothing else has done.

The Power of Key Words

In this current culture, different sides of polarized groups employ key words on social media to both conceal and reveal certain aspects of what the word or phrase means. As Alan Jacobs explains, “The sociology of employing key words is complicated and fascinating.”¹⁰⁸ The consistent use of even a single small phrase can inject such fear and strong negative feelings into the public conversation that its use can steadily turn the particular language into a toxic cultural topic. The words used skillfully can invite people to collaboration in political matters or dismiss someone’s credibility entirely.

There are some who have become extremely adept at what some researchers call “culture war theatrics,” a form of this rhetorical warfare. They are quite literally, according to one researcher, “entrepreneurs of conflict” who make their living whipping people into a frenzy over formerly non-existent issues that they themselves create. In the spring of 2021, Christopher Rufo, a conservative political activist, began to use a particular phrase as a weapon in his fight against the idea of systemic racism, the theory that racism had always structurally disadvantaged people of color in American society. Certain works of academic scholarship from the 1990’s by a group of legal scholars

¹⁰⁸ Jacobs, *How to Think*, 93.

researching racism were called to his attention. He then discovered a term by which he re-organized cultural politics in the spring of 2021. Benjamin Wallace-Wells, of *The New Yorker*, interviewed Rufo to talk about his strategy. In the interview Rufo unabashedly explained, “conservatives engaged in the culture war [...] needed new language for these issues, [...] ‘Political correctness’ is a dated term [...] ‘cancel culture’ is a vacuous term and ‘woke’ is [...] too broad, too easily brushed aside. ‘Critical race theory’ is the perfect villain.”¹⁰⁹ The phrase was an effective political weapon that had a sufficiently repellent effect on most middle-class Americans’ minds. Rufo elaborated further on his newfound term, “Strung together, the phrase ‘critical race theory’ connotes hostile, academic, divisive, race-obsessed, poisonous, elitist, anti-American.”¹¹⁰ As his project to insert the phrase into the American vernacular advanced, he published several magazine pieces promoting the term, infiltrating the conversations of ordinary people who were previously unfamiliar with it. Then on September 2, 2021, he made an appearance on “Tucker Carlson Tonight,” and very slowly and deliberately expressed to Carlson that not only was he “astonished” that “critical race theory” had “pervaded every aspect” of the federal government, but that it had become such an “existential threat” to the core values of the United States.

What Christopher Rufo had successfully accomplished was to imbue the phrase “critical race theory” with such negative connotation that every time any concept regarding race in America was encountered, whether it was slavery, Jim Crow

¹⁰⁹ Benjamin Wallace-Wells, “How a Conservative Activist Invented the Conflict Over Critical Race Theory”, *The New Yorker*, June 18, 2021, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/annals-of-inquiry/how-a-conservative-activist-invented-the-conflict-over-critical-race-theory>.

¹¹⁰ Wallace-Wells.

segregation, or any other historic racial issue, the pejorative term of CRT would come to mind. In his own words, his design was to “Put all of the various cultural insanities under that brand category.”¹¹¹ In the hands of a skilled politician or influencer adept at “performative conflict,” key words provide something to hate, fear, and fight over, even when there is very little public knowledge of what the words actually mean. This kind of indoctrination is a serious impediment to effective thinking and civil discourse around any cultural issue.

In another, albeit more benign, example of weaponized sloganeering, Republican congresswoman Liz Cheney, as an elected leader, is experiencing the wrath of most of her political party. But in this current cultural moment the emphasis is not on her being “held to account,” or “ostracized,” or “shunned,” although she is experiencing all those things. Instead, she is simply labeled a RINO, the term that is an old acronym for ‘Republican in Name Only.’ It is a slur that was once avoided at all costs unless it pertained to a party moderate who was blocking conservative goals, a description no one has ever used of Ms. Cheney. Yuval Levin, Director of Social, Cultural and Constitutional Studies at the American Enterprise Institute, asserts that because politicians have become so distracted from the actual work of Congress and so accomplished at what he calls “performative panic,” all but a handful of people in the Republican party are now labeled RINO on a regular basis by Republican politicians on the extreme right of the party. Levin posits, “The brew of culture-war animosities that increasingly dominates many arenas of American life is a mix of entertainment and

¹¹¹ Christopher F. Rufo (@realchrisrufo), Twitter, March 15, 2021, 2:14 p.m., <https://twitter.com/realchrisrufo/status/1371540368714428416?lang=en>.

politics that combines the worst of both. It is a chimerical ethos of performative conflict.”¹¹² Within this research on the power of performative words, it is worth noting a bit more about Levin’s chimera analogy. He explains:

In biology, a chimera is an organism that contains a mixture of different species, formed by fusing genes or tissues. But the term has its roots in Greek mythology, where it describes a fire-breathing monster with the head of a lion, the body of a goat, and the tail of a serpent. The ethos of our culture war is such a monstrous creature born of an unholy fusion - it’s not just out of its proper context, it is a wicked blend of attitudes that has no proper context.¹¹³

Levin is claiming there is no proper use of this kind of rhetoric and behavior because it does not belong in any sphere of life, especially for the Christian.

Unfortunately, many American Christians now have such an overarching vocabulary of conflict there is no area of life in which it is off limits, not even the Church.

The Power of Crisis Rhetoric

One of the patterns observed in the culture war tactics of Christian nationalism’s speech is the use of words and phrases that are metaphors of warfare. They are some of the most embedded weapons in polarized discourse today. Words like “undefensible,” “attacked,” “right on target,” “demolished him,” “shot him down,” “wiped them out,” make the argument seem like a form of military confrontation. The use of this language has become so common that if one attempts a more civil discourse in an endeavor for mutual understanding he will be roundly denounced. This public denunciation is on

¹¹² Yuval Levin, “How to Curb the Culture War,” *Comment Magazine*, April 7, 2022, <https://comment.org/how-to-curb-the-culture-war/>.

¹¹³ Levin.

display in Sohrab Ahmari's widely circulated piece, "Against David French-ism," in which he argues that the former religious liberties lawyer is "too earnest and insistently polite," to be an effective and suitable spokesman for Christian cultural issues. Ahmari says, "Civility and decency are secondary values. They regulate compliance with an established order and orthodoxy. We should seek to use these values to enforce our order and our orthodoxy, not pretend that they could ever be neutral. To recognize that enmity is real is its own kind of moral duty."¹¹⁴ The biblical framework presented above, especially in a passage like Romans 12 among many others, contends that civility and decency are not secondary values for the Christian nor is a commitment to these biblical virtues ever a compromise of the Christian's deeply held convictions. Paul was not telling Christians to concede gospel convictions in his instructions to the Roman church. Yet that is what the committed culture warriors of the current climate would have God's people believe – that kindness, gentleness, forbearance, and all the other marks of the fruit of the Spirit are evidence of capitulation.

The authors examined argue that successful culture warriors and politicians understand how to use calibrated rhetoric for manipulative purposes. In their study for the Cambridge Review of International Affairs, social scientists Alexandra Homolar and Ronny Scholz, explain, "The crisis stories that political agents tell simultaneously instill ontological insecurity among the American public and serve to transform their anxiety into confidence that the narrator's policy agendas are the route back to 'normality'."¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴ Sohrab Ahmari, "Against David French-ism," *First Things*, May 29, 2019, <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2019/05/against-david-french-ism>.

¹¹⁵ Alexandra Homolar and Ronny Scholz, "The Power of Trump-Speak: Populist Crisis Narratives and Ontological Security," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 32, no. 3 (May 4, 2019): 344–64, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2019.1575796>.

The public has been made to feel as if the world is chaotic and uncertain and that no major institution can be trusted. Therefore, the only thing that can inspire confidence is the “strongman” discussed above, who alone can assuage fear and restore greatness.

The Power of Conspiracy Theories

The most provocative words are those with which conspiracy theorists beguile entire online communities. There is an ascendancy of complex stories of nefarious activities carried out everywhere in the world, from powerful institutions in foreign lands to pizza parlors in America. Adrienne LaFrance, executive editor of *The Atlantic*, tells this story:

The power of the internet was understood early on, but the full nature of that power—its ability to shatter any semblance of shared reality, undermining civil society and democratic governance in the process—was not. The internet also enabled unknown individuals to reach masses of people at a scale Marshal McLuhan never dreamed of. The warping of shared reality leads a man with an AR-15 rifle to invade a pizza shop. It brings online forums into being where people colorfully imagine the assassination of a former secretary of state. It offers the promise of a Great Awakening, in which the elites will be routed and the truth will be revealed.¹¹⁶

The above referenced man with the AR-15 was Edgar Maddison Welch, a Christian from North Carolina who woke up one morning, took his cellphone and three loaded guns, and drove 360 miles to Northwest Washington, D.C. He held the automatic rifle across his body and walked through the door of a pizza restaurant called Comet Ping Pong and fired several rounds at a locked door. Mr. Welch sincerely believed that children were imprisoned behind this door at Comet Ping Pong in a child sex-

¹¹⁶ Adrienne LaFrance, “The Prophecies of Q,” *The Atlantic*, June, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/06/qanon-nothing-can-stop-what-is-coming/610567/>.

trafficking ring operated by then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. Conspiracy theorists initiating the idea had alleged that the activity was taking place in the basement of Comet Pizza, a building which had no basement.

The originator of the story had suggested that a few key words like pizza and pasta, found in emails obtained from a government official were being used as code for “girls” and “boys” involved in ritualistic child abuse. Welch believed these stories because as “Pizzagate” had blazed across the internet, he had begun binge-watching conspiracy-theory videos. LaFrance reports, “When Welch finally found himself inside the restaurant and understood that Comet Ping Pong was just a pizza shop, he set down his firearms [...] and surrendered to police, who had by then secured the perimeter. ‘The intel on this wasn’t 100 percent,’ Welch said after his arrest.”¹¹⁷ This would be comical if it were not indicative of the dire condition LaFrance is addressing. As Alan Jacobs says regarding conspiracy theories, like key words, they “have a tendency to become parasitic; they enter the mind and displace thought.”¹¹⁸

The conspiracy platform QAnon gained traction from 2017 to 2021 with a core theory that began revolving around Democrats whom it claimed were actually Satan-worshipping pedophiles plotting against the President and who would be destroyed by a coming “storm” that would clear out evil forces. It has evolved into an ever-changing web of schemes about politicians, the media and certain Christian movements. Although the basic tenets of Christianity can never be confirmed within QAnon, pseudo-

¹¹⁷ LaFrance.

¹¹⁸ Jacobs, *How to Think*, 95.

Christianity remains an enormous part of the experience as people express their “faith” through a feeling of being reborn, and a new awareness of mysterious knowledge. Many believers in QAnon choose to think of it as a foretelling of things to come. The rationalization is that in this time of a divided “realm” in America, QAnon is biblical and its prophecies are very vital.

To understand how this loosely connected belief system is influencing American politics, religion, media, and even belief in other theories, researchers are constantly examining tenets of the movement to observe correlation between these societal issues and QAnon believers. The PRRI researchers write, “For example, while 29% of all Americans agree [...] that the 2020 presidential election was stolen [...] 73% of QAnon believers say this is true. While a small segment (9%) agree that the COVID-19 vaccine contains a surveillance microchip that is the sign of the beast in biblical prophecy, this figure jumps to 39% among QAnon believers.”¹¹⁹ For those who are attracted to the delusions of conspiracy theories, there is always an overlapping pattern created by a lack of critical thinking. For example, the researchers find that those who believe in the 2020 stolen election theory will also be prone to believe in anti-masking activism. A belief in QAnon will overlap with skepticism about almost every institution, sadly including that of the church.

Conspiracy theories contain a substantial amount of apocalyptic language, giving adherents a conviction they will be the first to know when the end of the world is imminent. The opprobrium that users bring down on themselves when they attempt to

¹¹⁹ PRRI Staff, “Understanding QAnon’s Connection to American Politics, Religion, and Media Consumption,” *PRRI*, May 27, 2021, <https://www.prii.org/research/qanon-conspiracy-american-politics-report/>.

make a case for these issues serves as more proof in their minds that they are right and everyone else is wrong. The surveyed authors report that the logic of the conspiracy theorist is that if people object to what you are doing you must be right. The popularity and influence of conspiracy theories is so far-reaching and increasingly attractive because they supply a sense of power to those who believe that they have clarity on issues about which others have been deceived.

Conspiracies have a strong appeal to those whose desire is to be more in control of their world situation. To be in the know about furtive machinations and clandestine cabals adds to the air of superiority that accompanies Christian nationalism. The conspiracies are a particular temptation for Christians who feel that their American way of life is under siege and they can stop the destruction if they act on their exclusive knowledge.

Another consistent pattern is that of contrarian voices. Individuals drawn to conspiracy theories will take the narrative that is the conventional wisdom in mainstream discourse and then go out of the way to argue the counter-narrative, no matter how implausible it is. Whatever the conversation topic, there will be contrarian voices who resist the narrative, even if the resistance seems ludicrous to the contrarians themselves.

The attention-grabbing methods of conspiracy theorists are another commonality. Conversation starters are click-bait or enticing questions like “Isn’t it unusual that nobody has seen x, y, or z?” or “How come no one has been able to explain, fill in the blank?” Once attention is attracted, truth is distorted or suppressed to the extent that verification is undesired and any evidence that would require abandoning the story is dismissed out of hand.

Another of the many mental shortcuts people use to understand events in the world is proportionality bias. In making sense of a catastrophic event, the brain will automatically assign it a major cause. A default human assumption is that small events have small causes and large events have important but perhaps unknown origins. When the magnitude of the event does not seem to match the explanation, the conspiracy theorist will fill in the blanks with a much more significant cause. Big events like wars, assassinations, and election outcomes must have a conspiratorial explanation if the truth is deemed disproportionate to the event.

The research concurs that conspiracy theories are not just harmless beliefs but perpetrated increasingly with serious impact to justify irrational behavior. People inclined to activism interpret non-credentialed information so that it aligns with their own political values and interests. These interpretations then increase political, societal, and familial fragmentation for the activist. Individuals who shared plans to participate in the Capitol's post-election violence reported experiencing extreme family isolation and opposition. People united by these online group identities found themselves vulnerable to misleading narratives that targeted precisely what brought them together with strangers. Simultaneously, their closest relationships were neglected and damaged. As digital editor Derek Robinson explains, "It leaves politicians, reporters, neighbors and family members ignorant, until the aggrieved show up at your constituent town hall, or on your aunt's Facebook feed, or breaking down the doors of the Capitol with a makeshift battering

ram.”¹²⁰ Ignoring social phenomena that seem bizarre or distasteful does not slow their spread.

The information overload that so many people experience on social media leads to a dependent confidence on false and irresponsible sources combined with a sharing of low-quality information rapidly carried out by the use of the “like” or “retweet” button. The result is people take very little time to think critically or challenge the claims. The consensus of the Christian authors surveyed is that it is tragic for believers to be deluded by conspiracy theories; it is also incumbent on them to be aware of how these phenomena are negatively affecting what the founders called “the general welfare” of the nation. These weapons of words, capable of undermining peoples’ rational thinking, not to mention completely up-ending individual lives, depend on flawed logic and lack of evidence that have extremely dangerous implications for the whole society.

Summary of Correlation of Christian Nationalism with Information Illiteracy

Christian authors surveyed on this topic agree regarding the danger that information illiteracy poses to the society in general and the Church in particular. There is an avalanche of disinformation pervading every form of social media as well as cable news. One of the most dangerous aspects of this phenomenon is that those who are consuming the bulk of it consider themselves very well-informed and sincerely believe

¹²⁰ Derek Robertson, “The Secrets of QAnon’s Appeal,” Politico, April 18, 2021, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2021/04/18/review-qanon-documentary-hbo-into-the-storm-politics-482694>.

hysteria over each outrageous claim is the proper reaction. The malfeasance of the purveyors of these lies notwithstanding, it is the Christian's responsibility to cultivate an informed mind by thinking critically and biblically, avoiding what scripture calls "foolish myths." In this way the Christian can be a vehicle for truth in the broader culture resulting in the blessing that God intends for his people to be to the world.

An ample number of studies have been done in recent years to ascertain the extent and effects of conspiracy theories on the society and their connection to Christian nationalism. The complex research done by PRRI shows that the consumption of cable news with particular political leanings is by far the strongest independent predictor of belief in conspiracy theories. They note, "Remarkably, those who report most trusting far-right media sources are nearly *nine* times more likely to be QAnon believers compared to those who most trust broadcast networks such as ABC, CBS, and NBC. Even with a range of controls in place, Republicans and conservatives are twice as likely as Democrats and liberals to be QAnon believers."¹²¹ Ryan Burge, a Baptist pastor and author adds, "White evangelicalism has never been more politically unified than it is right now. In the 1970s, only 40 percent of white weekly churchgoing evangelicals identified as Republicans; in the most recent data, that number has risen to an all-time high of 70 percent."¹²²

In his research regarding the intertwining of religion and politics, David E. Campbell reports, "There is also increasing evidence, both anecdotal and systematic, that

¹²¹ PRRI Staff, "Understanding QAnon's Connection to American Politics, Religion, and Media Consumption."

¹²² Ryan Burge, "Why Evangelical Is Becoming Another Word for Republican," *The New York Times*, October 26, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/26/opinion/evangelical-republican.html>.

politics shapes religious views. Instead of religion preceding politics, politics takes priority over religion, thus flipping the typical assumption of how religion and politics come together.”¹²³ The literature is in agreement that they have definitely been conflated. The authors agree that the kind of gullibility and rage that is characteristic of negative, partisan commitment in the culture today is not being rejected by Christians; instead, they are allowing themselves to be defined by it. Christian nationalist thinkers embrace lies, fear-mongering and crisis rhetoric, and when they bring these dynamics into the church it causes devastating polarization mirroring that of the wider culture.

Christian Nationalism’s Correlation to a Lack of Principled Pluralism

One of the most prevalent characteristics of the staunch adherents to this ideology is an inability to coexist comfortably with other cultures. There is a refusal within the movement to accept that America is a pluralistic nation. The fear among Christian nationalists is that if there is tolerance of other religions, cultures, or customs America will become unmoored from the principles of her founding and conservative communities and values will be destroyed by the “other.” As stated above, Christian nationalists rely heavily on the “us versus them” narrative, allowing them to problematize any narrative or policy that might center on “collaboration, dialogue, and peaceful conflict resolution.”¹²⁴

¹²³ David E. Campbell, “The Perils of Politicized Religion,” *Daedalus* 149, no. 3 (June 29, 2020): 87–104, https://doi.org/10.1162/daed_a_01805.

¹²⁴ Homolar and Löffmann, “Populism and the Affective Politics of Humiliation Narratives.”

Forces Mitigating Against Pluralism

A fear of losing cultural influence to outsiders was the number one driver behind the Capitol insurrectionists' conduct according to extensive studies conducted by Robert Pape at the University of Chicago. Pape's research shows "'Great Replacement' theory has achieved iconic status with white nationalists and holds that minorities are progressively replacing white populations due to mass immigration policies and low birthrates."¹²⁵ To offer just one example, many of the alleged insurrectionists from the state of Texas, home of 36 of the 377 charged nationwide, came from counties which have been losing white populations much more frequently since 2015. As Homolar and Löffmann explain, "Christian nationalists' claims of victimhood are constructed around a theme of being forced to forget their "white" past."¹²⁶ It is yet another bit of glue that binds this community together and functions as justification for its paradoxical sense of superiority and victimization. When a strong Christian identity begins to wane, or was never present to begin with, identities will form around other organizing forces.

The authors surveyed contend that there is nothing uniting the citizens of America, including Christians, as much as there are issues dividing them, including demographics, religion, and race. Jonathan Haidt reasons that the problem lies with human nature that is innately selfish. He contends, "Human nature is groupish [...] our minds contain a variety of mental mechanisms that make us adept at promoting our

¹²⁵ Robert Pape, "What an Analysis of 377 Americans Arrested or Charged in the Capitol Insurrection Tells Us," *Washington Post*, April 6, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/04/06/capitol-insurrection-arrests-cpost-analysis/>.

¹²⁶ Homolar and Löffmann, "Populism and the Affective Politics of Humiliation Narratives."

group's interest, in competition with other groups."¹²⁷ Cohesive tribes function like living organisms and in many cases they consider contentiousness their advantage.

As America's white population shrinks and the country becomes more religiously and racially diverse, the Christian nationalist's fear of losing its collective privilege is exacerbated. Participants increasingly promote revenge ideologies, constructing imaginary, anxiety-producing future scenarios that incite fear. Within the movement, the exclusive community of people who share a common origin and destiny want nothing more than to remain separate from the unwanted "others." A key focus of the ideological narrative is on maligning newcomers to the country with an emphasis on vilifying "immigrants who take *our* jobs, *our* housing, and *our* health care while posing a security risk to *our* women and children."¹²⁸

The powerful tool Christian nationalists use successfully is granting political power to those who will prevent these social changes. Social scientists Lilliana Mason, et al, found that to the extent that a politician can portray his "political function as protecting majority, higher-status groups (e.g., whites, Christians) from minority, lower-status groups (e.g., non- white immigrants...) he will potentially be able to tap into a reservoir of cultural antipathy for these latter groups."¹²⁹ These types of candidates who know how to identify domestic enemies and have a plan to prevent their proliferation, have great appeal in the nationalist movement.

¹²⁷ Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*, 221.

¹²⁸ Homolar and Löffmann, "Populism and the Affective Politics of Humiliation Narratives."

¹²⁹ Lilliana Mason, Julie Wronski, and John V. Kane, "Activating Animus: The Uniquely Social Roots of Trump Support," *American Political Science Review*, (2021):1-9.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055421000563>.

The Tea Party movement arose during the first few months of Barack Obama's presidency in protest of government overreach exemplified by his stimulus and health care plan. Although the group of candidates attempted to distinguish itself from far-right extremists by using less inflammatory racial language, it nevertheless vocally promoted demographic change as a threat to the nation's essential character. An underlying message of many of the candidates was one of defeating nefarious elites who were attempting to diminish white Christian power. Political and religious researchers saw the movement as a phenomenon about which Robert P. Jones, the CEO of Public Religion Research Institute says, "The Tea Party was animated by a narrative of cultural loss that allowed it to function as a continuation of the White Christian Strategy."¹³⁰ For white Americans who felt that their cultural touchstones were disappearing, the sea-change of the Obama presidency provoked many undercurrents of distress. Jones adds, "Shifting social norms, declining religious affiliation, changing demographics [...] all were embodied in one powerful symbol: a black man in the White House."¹³¹

Although President Obama's progressive agenda would be the impetus for conservatives' open hostility, the research reveals that for many white Americans, events from George W. Bush's attempts at immigration reform to Obama's election increased fears that cultural marginalization of whites would accelerate. The goading cultural role played during those years by many well-known media personalities helped ignite the ethnic and racial anxiety of the country. Rush Limbaugh, the late conservative talk show

¹³⁰ Robert P. Jones, *The End of White Christian America* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2017). 97.

¹³¹ Jones. 97.

host who had been a champion of the Tea Party since its inception, introduced original songs consisting of denigrating racial slurs happily supported by his audience. One of those productions, “Barack the Magic Negro,” aired continuously during the 2008 presidential campaign to insinuate that white people needed to wake up to the fact that cultural and ethnic values would be replaced in America by Obama’s election. Phillip S. Gorski, Professor of Sociology at Yale University who has published several books on religion, history, and politics and his co-author Samuel Perry, Professor of Sociology at the University of Oklahoma, found that when advocates of the movement were surveyed, “Polls found high levels of racial animus among Tea Party supporters [...] nativist sentiment was also widespread.”¹³²

For the past decade, American right and left have engaged in a ferocious culture war in which civility is mocked and rejected. Both sides have a deep sense of antagonistic grievance coupled with an insufficient understanding of each other, not to mention very limited self-understanding. Each side is dealing with an opposing community that treats many debatable and contingent cultural matters as if they are matters of life or death religious convictions. Haidt calls this “The Sanctity/Degradation Foundation” of political argument. “It’s the ability to endow ideas, objects, and events with infinite value, particularly those [...] that bind a group together into a single entity.”¹³³ This propensity to assign transcendence makes civil discourse extremely difficult. There is no hope for

¹³² Philip S Gorski, Samuel L Perry, *The Flag and the Cross: White Christian Nationalism and the Threat to American Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 82.

¹³³ Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*. 193.

accommodation to the common good or general welfare when each side believes it would be apostasy to compromise.

Researchers find that in this polarized culture there are many Americans who don't know where to turn for a truly meaningful conversation. If they disagree with some but not all components of critical race theory, or if they want to talk about how universities have gone too far with initiatives of diversity, those with whom they can engage in thoughtful discourse are few. They are a silent, exhausted majority, frequently shouted down by radicalized extremists on both sides and very often threatened into silence.

According to these authors and researchers, there are a disproportionate number of white evangelicals today who will choose their cultural and partisan ideologies over biblical theology, and the lamentable fact for the Christian research participants is that the evangelicals earnestly believe they are choosing faith. However, it is obvious that, when pressed, evangelicals who embrace this ideology find it difficult to defend their culture war positions from an unambiguously biblical theology.

What American Christians Need to Embrace

America is a multi-faith, multi-ethnic democracy on an enormous continent. The researchers contend that if the polarization cannot heal, if Christian nationalism does not stop spilling over into the churches, and if civil discourse cannot return, America will not adapt and what is left of the Church will “sort” into categories that fit political preferences.

J. Budziszewski, professor of government and philosophy at the University of Texas and author of several books on politics in America, writes extensively about this angst and its source saying, “The desperate sickness of fundamentalism requires a radical cure. Above all, evangelicals must rediscover the social teaching of Scripture [...] develop the enlarged charity necessary to act on this teaching.”¹³⁴ There are deep and sometimes irreconcilable differences that expose the challenges to developing that “charity.” John D. Inazu, the Sally D. Danforth Distinguished Professor of Law and Religion at Washington University in St. Louis, agrees with this assessment of fear of the viewpoints and values of others. Inazu cites a November 2014 constitutional amendment in Alabama, prohibiting state courts from applying foreign laws. He says the amendment was “the result of much fear-mongering about the incursions of Sharia law [which ultimately] had no legal consequences [...] But it was not without symbolic effect, and traded on anti-Muslim hostility.”¹³⁵ His belief is that if evangelicals would re-introduce the biblical mandates of forbearance, humility, compassion, gentleness, and love into civic aspirations, they could advance a move toward a confident and principled pluralism. He says that these virtues remind Christians that they bear responsibility to recognize that in a pluralistic democracy, “People are for the most part free to pursue their own beliefs [...] even those beliefs we find morally objectionable. Humility takes the further step of recognizing that others will sometimes find our beliefs [...] morally objectionable. [The Christian is armed with] Patience [...] restraint, persistence, and endurance.”¹³⁶

¹³⁴ J. Budziszewski and David L. Weeks, *Evangelicals in the Public Square: Four Formative Voices on Political Thought and Action* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006).

¹³⁵ Inazu, *Confident Pluralism*. 3

¹³⁶ Inazu. 11

According to these authors, Christians, of all people, have been equipped by the fruit of the indwelling Spirit to explore the many ways individuals can live together in their deep differences. They need look no further than the paradigmatic first century church and its commitment to the biblical principles that undergirded their lives as “foreigners and exiles.” All Americans, Christian or not, need look no further than the framers’ deeply embedded principle that social living should be a treasured inheritance that is a possession of the entire society.

Living together in principled pluralism means all the differences will still exist, but if Christians honor the humanity of their opponents, there can be a way forward in humility, patience, and restraint in interactions. Inazu offers this, “Confident pluralism allows genuine difference to coexist [...] precisely because we are confident in our own beliefs, and in the groups and institutions that sustain them.”¹³⁷ In other words, when this inherited system works as the framers intended, there should be no fear that one side is going to deconstruct the other. Of course, all agree that there will always be a struggle for people of deep conviction to live in a world with those whose opposite views are also held with deep conviction, especially if those opposing views are regarded as unreasonable, indecent and even dangerous by the other side. But they also agree that the well-formed Christian has actually been spiritually equipped and enabled to persuade the wider culture to abandon beliefs that are destructive to a flourishing life. That can only take place when Christians are living missionally in the world for the sake of Christ’s kingdom. As one after another writer has pointed out, it is never a question of ability or equipping for the Christian; it is always a matter of willingness as to whether or not they

¹³⁷ Inazu. 7.

are going to follow Jesus in imitation of him. Each Christian author and researcher is implicitly asking the question, if Christians are not willing to live like the one whose name they bear, the one who has specifically commissioned them to do so, what then is their purpose in his world?

The authors have repeated condemnation for those who lead Christians to believe that living civilly, winsomely, and missionally implies weakness, timidity, or surrender on matters of conviction. They implore Christians to remember that the fruit of the Spirit has never been inadequate for any cultural moment, no matter how ferocious the opposition has been. Animosity surrounds the culture of political engagement and yet the spiritually mature Christian, these authors agree, is an apologist for Christianity with his gentle, reverent life, not his vitriol and cruelty. James Hunter writes of “contours of flourishing” toward which Christian communities must strive. He explains, “The practice of faithful presence, then, generates relationships and institutions that are fundamentally covenantal in character, the ends of which are the fostering of meaning, purpose, truth, beauty belonging, and fairness – not just for Christians but for everyone.”¹³⁸ These sources agree that for Christians it is the *end* of the biblical story that should determine the manner in which they live in the present.

Mark Stirling, pastor of Cornerstone St. Andrews, and Director of the Chalmers Institute, says this about the responsibility of Christian behavior, “From a biblical perspective, the telos of a restored and renewed creation shapes present ethical behavior. Restoration of persons ‘in the image of Christ cannot be accomplished by means that are not Christ-like [...] how we hold to moral positions is just as important a moral

¹³⁸ Hunter, *To Change the World*. 263.

consideration as the specifics of what we hold to.”¹³⁹ It is important for Christians to remember at this cultural and political moment that “America is dealing with the toxic effects of *two* powerful outlier communities, and both feed on each other’s dysfunction to justify their own radicalization.”¹⁴⁰ It is the profound misunderstanding that only one side has the potential to tear the church apart that makes the church vulnerable to the attack of the real enemy.

That misunderstanding, that lack of self-awareness is causing Christians to misrepresent the nature of Christian faith to the world. There is concurrence that it will take evangelicals who are deeply distressed at the extraordinary political focus and the cruelty and extremism that has characterized it to revolt against this dangerous movement. Stirling and the others agree that it will take an evangelical movement willing to say that its desire is to be characterized by the Micah 6:8 mandate, “He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” and to be able to critically evaluate itself and see the disparities between its behavior and these commands. These authors agree that political identities are not an expression of Christian faith but often reject the truth of the very scripture they claim to protect.

¹³⁹ A. Mark Sterling, “Toward an Embodied Moral Theology,” Henry Center for Theological Understanding, April 22, 2021, <https://henrycenter.tiu.edu/2021/04/toward-an-embodied-moral-theology/>.

¹⁴⁰ French, French, David, “How the Right’s Rules of Rhetoric Create Racial Provocateurs,” *The Atlantic*, January 13, 2022, <https://newsletters.theatlantic.com/the-third-rail/61e049507d9a7c002050d981/how-the-rights-rules-of-rhetoric-create-racial-provocateurs/>.

Summary of The Lack of Principled Pluralism

There is a meaningful tradition in the rich debate procedures at the Yale Political Union, a close-knit community at Yale University. Although the debate society is deeply competitive, they do not count winners and losers. There are only two things that matter. The first objective of each debate is to win someone over to your way of thinking, something you believe in with conviction. The second is that you be won over. It is an extraordinary feat and the rich phrase in the Union parlance that is used to describe it is to “break on the floor.” It means that a student can come into a debate and after careful, patient, humble persuasion from the other side, actually jettison his own preconceived ideas and assumptions enough to see some merit in the other’s argument. It is, of course, obvious that a student is not winning or losing based on what a judge says about how excellently the opposing student defends his position. The vulnerable student is always exposing himself to the risk of changing his mind or perhaps seeing a different framework that makes sense to him. Alan Jacobs explains, “To be broken on the floor was a token of good faith and an indication of a willingness not just to accept but to live out the values of the community.”¹⁴¹ A willingness to be “broken on the floor,” is evidence not that a person has thrown away his convictions, but that he has begun to see other human beings not just as those who disagree with him, certainly not as those who are evil, and most assuredly not as those who are attempting to destroy the world as he knows it. If he is a Christian, he has begun to see them as fellow image bearers with

¹⁴¹ Jacobs, *How to Think*. 53.

whom he can build a bridge for dialogue, but most importantly those to whom he can offer a relationship that embodies the character of Christ who indwells him.

In a pluralistic society, the body politic is made up of people from many different faith, political, geographical and cultural backgrounds. All the authors surveyed agree that the great privilege and responsibility of a Christian citizen of this country is to live peaceably with fellow citizens. There is a biblical mandate for that according to Romans 12:14-18:

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. Repay no one evil for evil but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

The key to this, the writers agree, is that one must be willing. As every author examined has said, it is good for Christians to understand how to live well in a pluralistic society, exercising the fruit of the Spirit and loving neighbors as Christ commanded. “It is good” as Jacobs maintains, “to cultivate a more general disposition of skepticism about our own motives and generosity toward the motives of others.”¹⁴² It is what he and others believe will begin to mend the torn fabric of the country, but more importantly for Christians, to mend the torn fabric of the Church.

Summary of Literature Review

This review covered three areas of literature, in addition to a biblical framework of Christian identity. The three areas examined the political identity markers of Christian nationalism, the correlation between information illiteracy and Christian nationalism, and

¹⁴² Jacobs.

the lack of an understanding or pursuit of principled pluralism that is characteristic of Christian nationalism. Several important observations have emerged from this review. Some of the political characteristics that manifest themselves within the movement of Christian nationalism are a persuasion of superiority and inclination to exclusion, a distorted perception of the history and future of America and her founders, and a desire for an authoritarian type of political leader who will stem the tide of white cultural decline. Also included in the observations is a distinct correlation between information illiteracy and Christian nationalism seen in the sheer animus and weaponization of language intended to incite fear, rage, and division.

Finally, there is a lack of any incentive to establish the “out of many, one” principle upon which America was founded. Confident or principled pluralism is neither desired nor sought by those who are part of this phenomenon. There was nothing in the literature that addressed how individual pastors could strengthen a Christian identity in their congregants that would supersede a Christian nationalist identity once it has taken root; therefore, this study is significant for the purpose of helping Christian leaders to cultivate the primacy of identity in Christ to help Christians resist the destructive influences and pressures of Christian nationalist ideologies. This will be discussed in chapter five.

Chapter 3

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of how pastors can restore and strengthen a Christian identity that supersedes Christian nationalism among their congregants. The assumption of the study was that pastors who have contended with this phenomenon would have developed discernment in recognizing the characteristics of the issue among congregants. They would have also put principles into practice that would not only be effective in their own churches but would instruct and encourage other pastors and Christian leaders. To comprehend the point of view of these pastors, how they interpreted and made sense of their own experiences, a qualitative study was designed to identify four main areas of focus. To examine these areas more closely, the following research questions guided the qualitative research:

1. What are some of the characteristics of Christian nationalism that pastors are observing within their congregations?
2. What are some of the ways pastors are addressing what they are observing?
3. What are the some of the ways angry congregants are responding to pastors?
4. What encourages pastors who are dealing with this?

Design of the Study

Sharan B. Merriam defines qualitative research as referring to interpretive research techniques for describing and translating the meaning of certain social

phenomena.¹⁴³ Merriam agrees with those who have described four major characteristics that are key to understanding the essence of qualitative research. She points out, "...the focus is on process, understanding, and meaning; the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis; the process is inductive; and the product is richly descriptive."¹⁴⁴

Describing the focus on process she writes, "The overall purposes of qualitative research are to achieve an understanding of how people make sense out of their lives, delineate the process (rather than the outcome or product) of meaning-making, and describe how people interpret what they experience."¹⁴⁵ The researcher is striving to comprehend how the people involved in a particular setting are interpreting what is going on in their lives, and what meaning they have constructed for what is happening as they interact with their particular environment. As Merriam explains, "The *primary* goal of a basic qualitative study is to uncover and interpret these meanings."¹⁴⁶

According to Merriam, "A second characteristic of all forms of qualitative research is that the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis."¹⁴⁷ However, even though the human researcher is the ideal instrument, human biases can enter the study and impact both data collection and analysis. Of these Merriam

¹⁴³ Sharan B. Merriam and Elizabeth J. Tisdell, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, Fourth edition, The Jossey-Bass Higher and Adult Education Series (San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons, 2015).15.

¹⁴⁴ Merriam and Tisdell.15.

¹⁴⁵ Merriam and Tisdell. 15.

¹⁴⁶ Merriam and Tisdell. 25.

¹⁴⁷ Merriam and Tisdell.16.

advises, "...it is important to identify them and monitor them in relation to the theoretical framework and in light of the researcher's own interests, to make clear how they may be shaping the collection and interpretation of data."¹⁴⁸

The process of qualitative research is inductive in that the data is gathered for building general concepts, hypotheses, or theories. For example, the researcher goes into the field conducting interviews, making observations, and collecting documents. Subsequently, these smaller pieces of data collected from those activities are combined and analyzed to glean general patterns and themes from the different aspects of the practices investigated.

The final key characteristic of this type of research is that it is richly descriptive. Merriam describes the components of this rich descriptive nature when she says, "There are likely to be descriptions of the context, the participants involved, and the activities of interest."¹⁴⁹ This qualitative research study was designed to fulfill these four key characteristics of this type of research. It was conducted with semi-structured interviews as the primary source of data-gathering. This qualitative method provided for the discovery of descriptive and comprehensive data from the participants experiencing the phenomena of Christian nationalism in their contexts. Because Merriam states that, "Interviewing is often the primary data collection strategy in qualitative studies,"¹⁵⁰ careful criteria were used to determine which potential participants would be the most information-rich in their contributions.

¹⁴⁸ Merriam and Tisdell.16.

¹⁴⁹ Merriam and Tisdell.18.

¹⁵⁰ Merriam and Tisdell.18.

Participant Sample Selection

Regarding the choice of participants, Merriam explains, “Purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight, and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned.”¹⁵¹ Therefore, this research required participants who are able to communicate in depth about the phenomena of Christian nationalism and the effects of it on the congregations with which they are interacting. The purposeful study sample consisted of a selection of men from the population with lead pastor experience, who are experiencing or have experienced discordant issues in their churches because of Christian nationalism and who have developed insights and expertise with which to address it. Another criterion was that they be mature, well-respected men whom other pastors or Christian leaders would recognize by their responses as someone to whom they could look for guidance.

Participants were chosen in a snowball, chain, or network type of sample to provide for a network of information-rich participants. In this study, the strategy was to locate “a few key participants who easily meet the criteria...”¹⁵² and who could readily identify others who would also “exemplify the characteristics of interest in the study.”¹⁵³ Participants were purposefully chosen to provide representation from various geographical areas of the country. The churches led by each man also varied in active congregant size and Session size, to whom the participant pastors are responsible. Also taken into consideration was the fact that the political leanings of demographics would

¹⁵¹ Merriam and Tisdell.96.

¹⁵² Merriam and Tisdell.98.

¹⁵³ Merriam and Tisdell.98.

have implications for the extent to which the problems were experienced in the church and for the methods being used by the pastors to mitigate the issues. The initial selection of participants represented six current lead pastors, one former lead pastor, and one well-known religious liberties attorney who is now a Christian journalist with considerable nation-wide experience speaking and writing about this particular cultural issue. The final study was conducted through personal interviews with each of these men. They were invited to participate via an introductory letter, followed by a personal phone call. All expressed interest without hesitation and gave written informed consent to participate. In addition, each participant signed a “Research Participant Consent Form” to respect and to protect the human rights of the participants. The following is a sample of this form.

RESEARCH PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

I agree to participate in the research which is being conducted by Kay Gabrysch to investigate Christian nationalism in the Church for the Doctor of Ministry degree program at Covenant Theological Seminary.

I understand that my participation is entirely voluntary. I can withdraw my consent at any time without penalty and have the results of the participation, to the extent that they can be identified as mine, returned to me, removed from the research records, and/or destroyed.

The following points have been explained to me:

- 1) The purpose of the research is to investigate the phenomenon of Christian Nationalism and gain an understanding of how pastors can strengthen a Christian identity that supersedes Christian nationalism among their congregants.
- 2) Potential benefits of the research may include encouragement for pastors and Christian leaders who minister to congregants involved in Christian nationalism. Another benefit may be that Christian leaders learn effective methods to deal with the issues of the phenomena and strengthen Christian identity. Though there are no direct benefits for participants, the hope is that they will be encouraged by sharing their experiences with someone eager to listen and learn.
- 3) The research process will include interviewing men with current or past lead pastor experience who are experiencing or have experienced discordant issues in their churches because of Christian nationalism and who have developed insights and

expertise with which to address it. The data collected from the interviews will be analyzed and compiled.

- 4) Participants in this research will answer protocol questions and discuss them with the interviewer in a semi-structured interview for 60-90 minutes.
- 5) Potential discomforts or stresses: None. The participant is free to strike from the transcript anything that he wants deleted upon reconsideration.
- 6) Potential risks: None
- 7) Any information that I provide will be held in strict confidence. At no time will my name be reported along with my responses. The data gathered for this research is confidential, and will not be released in any individually identifiable form without my prior consent, unless otherwise required by law. Audiotapes or videotapes of interviews will be erased following the completion of the dissertation. By my signature, I am giving informed consent for the use of my responses in this research project.
- 8) Limits of Privacy: I understand that, by law, the researcher cannot keep information confidential if it involves abuse of a child or vulnerable adult, or plans for a person to harm themselves or to hurt someone else.
- 9) The researcher will answer any further questions about the research, now or during the study.

Kay Gabrysch, Researcher

Date

Printed Name and Signature of Participant

Date

Please sign both copies of this form. Keep one. Return the other to researcher. Thankyou.

Research at Covenant Theological Seminary which involves human participants is overseen by the Institutional Review Board. Questions or problems regarding your rights as a participant should be addressed to: Director, Doctor of Ministry; Covenant Theological Seminary; 12330 Conway Road; St. Louis, MO 63141; Phone (314) 434-4044.
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Data Collection

The primary data gathering method used for this study was semi-structured interviews. According to Merriam, "In this type of interview either all of the questions are more flexibly worded or the interview is a mix of more and less structured

questions.”¹⁵⁴ The interview questions have an open-ended nature that aid the researcher in building upon the participant responses to explore them more comprehensively during analysis. Ultimately, these methods enabled this study to look for common themes, patterns, concerns, and contrasting views across the variation of participants.

Regarding interview questions Merriam contends, “The key to getting good data from interviewing is to ask good questions; asking good questions takes practice.”¹⁵⁵ She describes the questions in further detail by adding that “Interview questions can ask for experiences, opinions, feelings, knowledge, sensory, or demographic data. Hypothetical, devil’s advocate, ideal position, and interpretive questions can also be used to elicit good data...”¹⁵⁶ Two pilot interviews were conducted to field test the effectiveness, clarity and validity of the questions for eliciting information.

Initial interview protocol categories were derived from the literature but evolved around the explanations and descriptions that emerged from doing constant comparison work during the interviewing process. Coding and categorizing the data simultaneously with the interview process was effective in allowing for the emergence of new sources of data.

The researcher interviewed eight participants for 60-90 minutes each. Prior to the interview, each participant and the researcher conducted an informal conversation regarding current conditions of weather, Covid, families, etc. Because of a surge in Covid in several areas of the country in which the in-person interviews were to take place, most

¹⁵⁴ Merriam and Tisdell.110.

¹⁵⁵ Merriam and Tisdell.117.

¹⁵⁶ Merriam and Tisdell.136.

participants requested to meet virtually rather than face to face. Those interviews were recorded by the researcher on the computer. All other interviews were audiotaped by the researcher with an I-phone. Immediately after each interview, the researcher transcribed the interview and made notes with descriptive and reflective observations on the participant's responses. The researcher was able to complete the data gathering over the course of six weeks.

The following questions were used for the interview protocol:

1. In what ways have you experienced the characteristics of Christian nationalism in your church?
2. What are some of the practices that have addressed the issues in your context?
3. How have these methods proved effective?
4. Tell me about some of the challenges you have experienced addressing the issues.
5. What are some ways you respond when congregants push back in some way on your teaching on these issues?
6. How do you help congregants who think this phenomenon is irrelevant?

Data Analysis

As soon as possible and always within a couple days of each meeting, the researcher personally transcribed each interview. This study utilized the constant comparison method of routinely analyzing the data throughout the interview process. This method provided for the ongoing revision, clarification, and evaluation of the resultant data categories. As Merriam emphasizes, "Data analysis is one of the few

aspects of doing qualitative research – perhaps the only one – in which there is a preferred way [...] the much-preferred way to analyze data in a qualitative study is to do it simultaneously with data collection.”¹⁵⁷ The immediate consolidation and interpretation of participants’ responses identified how well the research questions had been answered.

After the interviews and observation notes were fully transcribed into computer files, the researcher coded them by RQ relevance. Merriam explains, “Coding is nothing more than assigning some sort of shorthand designation to various aspects of your data so that you can easily retrieve specific pieces of the data.”¹⁵⁸ Short phrases were used to focus and identify the common themes, patterns and findings across the variation of participants. Descriptive notations were used for philosophical ideas which the participants shared. Pseudonyms were used to distinguish participant data and to help keep their identities confidential. In addition, short queries regarding the relevancy of a response to a piece of literature were noted in the margins.

Researcher Position

All research is filtered through the perspectives and values of a human instrument who must be constantly identifying and assessing areas of preference that might impede impartial research. One of the most challenging aspects of this research was eliminating biases induced by the social location of the researcher. The researcher was residing in an area of the country where Christian nationalism was prevalent and the temptation to project daily life experiences onto the data was strong. Because the researcher had been

¹⁵⁷ Merriam and Tisdell.197.

¹⁵⁸ Merriam and Tisdell.199.

perplexed and challenged for several years by the problem, an inordinate amount of literature on the subject had already been read and reflected upon. Merriam discusses this when she says, “Rather than trying to eliminate these biases or ‘subjectivities,’ it is important to identify them and monitor them in relation to the theoretical framework and in light of the researcher’s own interests, to make clear how they may be shaping the collection and interpretation of data.”¹⁵⁹ It was imperative for the researcher to determine the theoretical framework which was forming the lens through which the phenomena would be studied. One of the ways Merriam identifies the theoretical theory that every researcher brings to a study is “...the lens through which you view the world.”¹⁶⁰ She insists that researchers need to be self-reflective to identify a theoretical framework. Questions for self-reflection begin with what a researcher’s disciplinary orientation is. She asserts, “Each of us has been socialized into a discipline...with its own vocabulary, concepts, and theories...It determines what you are curious about, what puzzles you, and hence, what questions you ask in turn begin to give form to your investigation.”¹⁶¹ Although a clear way to identify a theoretical framework is to pinpoint the types of literature one is reading, a researcher must also question whether an ardent fascination with the subject has resulted in an over-abundance of examination of the available material. However, the researcher determined that there was a significant gap in the knowledge base regarding the phenomena. The researcher concluded that data would be fairly analyzed and interpreted because of this particular theoretical orientation and not

¹⁵⁹ Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*.16.

¹⁶⁰ Merriam and Tisdell.85.

¹⁶¹ Merriam and Tisdell.85.

despite it. It is because of the gap in the knowledge base that the researcher chose to examine this issue. The theoretical framework of the researcher would provide a strong focus for the inquiry. A more competent interpretation of the data would allow theory to be built inductively from the information gleaned from the field.

Study Limitations

As stated previously, participants interviewed for this study were limited to those serving in the role of lead pastor, former lead pastor or someone with extensive expertise on this topic. Participants were also limited to those who were having or have had some personal experience in witnessing the effects of Christian nationalism within their congregations. Further research would be needed to broaden the participant selection to include women and less experienced men in Christian leadership who regularly encounter the phenomena. Much of the study's findings, however, may be postulated and appropriately applied to women Bible study teachers, counselors, youth leaders and others who interact with Christians who participate wittingly or unwittingly in Christian nationalism. Readers who desire to generalize some of the aspects of the findings from this research should test those aspects appropriately in their context.

Chapter 4

Findings

The purpose of this study was to understand the challenges for pastors who are experiencing this phenomenon in their churches and are seeking to strengthen a Christian identity in congregants that will supersede that of Christian nationalism. This chapter provides the findings of the eight interviews and reports on common themes and relevant insights pertaining to the research questions. To address the purpose of this study, the following research questions guided the qualitative research.

1. What are some of the characteristics of Christian nationalism that pastors are observing within their congregations?
2. What are some of the ways pastors are addressing what they are observing?
3. What are the some of the ways troubled congregants are responding to pastors?
4. What encourages pastors who are dealing with this?

Introduction to Participants and Contexts

This qualitative research study was conducted using semi-structured interviews with participants who were each experiencing some manifestation of Christian nationalism in their contexts. Participants were purposefully chosen to provide representation from various geographical areas of the country; however, most were located in southern areas of the United States. The churches led by each man also varied in size of both active congregants and the Session to whom the participant pastors are

responsible. The length of time the pastor has served his current church also had bearing on methods or strategies that might mitigate the issues. The names of the final selection of participants have been changed to protect identity. So that the reader can more accurately understand each of the individual contributions, the men and their ministerial contexts will be briefly introduced

Carl is a veteran pastor currently serving as lead pastor in a multi-ethnic, cosmopolitan church in the south.

Morris is a former religious liberties attorney who is currently a national speaker and author focusing on Christians' participation in political and cultural issues of the day.

Robert is a minority associate pastor in a majority white church. He leads a thriving outreach ministry in his multi-ethnic southern city.

Wallace is a veteran senior pastor currently serving as an interim pastor in a mid-western majority white church.

Justin has served for fifteen years as senior pastor of an affluent church of considerable size in a southern metropolitan city.

Samuel has served in the past in large northeastern areas and is currently in his fifteenth year as lead pastor at a church in a southern metropolitan city.

Martin serves as a director of culture and theology of an international Christian publication and also as an assistant pastor in a large southern city.

Raymond is a veteran senior pastor who has been at his current multi-racial church in a large southern city for under ten years.

Characteristics of Christian Nationalism Observed

The first research question sought to identify the characteristics of Christian nationalism that participants are observing in their own context. Most participants saw the effects manifested in various ways, with varying degrees of threat to individual spiritual growth and corporate church unity. The most easily identifiable aspects of Christian nationalism fell into four categories: biblical illiteracy, misplaced political loyalty, a distinct view of America as a Christian nation, and disinterest in the common good due to extreme individualism.

Biblical Illiteracy

Almost every participant identified some evidence of a lack of biblical literacy among congregants. Whether it was visible in the form of a dearth of general scripture knowledge or a lack of accurate interpretation, the participants saw a demonstrable lack of scripture's impact on their congregants' lives over the past few years. There were two principal areas about which most of the participants expressed concern: the dominant influence of sources other than scripture that are indoctrinating their people and the resultant behavior.

Lack of Biblically Informed Conduct

Several individual participants mentioned that although they had assumed a certain level of spiritual maturity among many congregants, they saw evidence of an erosion of that over the last few years. Judging from the conduct of many church members, it could be observed that the Bible was not the primary communicator of

values and behavior to them. It was not only a disappointment but it came as a surprise to most of the participants. Raymond lamented that for all the pride his denomination has taken in theological accuracy, form of church government, and advanced scholarship, “these last two years have really pulled back the curtain and disrobed us and shown us that we are skeletons, emaciated and not well-formed.” Several of the pastors expressed disappointment that their people were distinctly groundless in the way they approach political and cultural issues. One participant said his people are not thinking primarily “through the grid of scripture and the person of Jesus as opposed to their political persuasions, news feeds, and preferred social commentators.” Wallace said he felt that the biggest influence on his peoples’ thinking is coming from news and social media outlets that have “become propaganda machines rather than news organizations.” Several are experiencing discouragement because their congregants are being “catechized 24/7 by social media and the culture.” One commented on the frustration of many pastors that it is “impossible to undo in 30 minutes on a Sunday what the congregants have been ingesting all week long.” Martin added that it is easy for a pastor to feel like a failure when he looks at some of his congregants’ Facebook pages or views any of their other public social media comments. Robert added that they were much more likely to be asking each other, “What do the pundits say about this?” than they were to be searching for biblical wisdom.

All but two of the participants stated some variation on the theme of evidence of a lack of kindness and respect among believers in their churches. Once more, they each attributed this to the information diet their people are digesting from outside sources other than the Bible. Most agree there is a “loss of objective behavior” that comes when

people either do not know or refuse to practice what is taught in the scriptures. Morris expressed his belief that a church can “tolerate a wide range of political differences when the fruit of the Spirit is genuinely on display” but confessed he has seen a decrease in that. He said he has found it extremely disheartening that people are prioritizing political and cultural tribal loyalty over brotherly love within the church. Justin said he had been surprised not only at what was happening but at who the instigators were, people he would have never expected to be influenced by this movement.

While they all agreed that Covid had wreaked havoc on the habit of gathering together in regular church attendance, depriving congregants of the formation that flows from that means of grace, the consensus was that the primary deficiency they are observing is diligent Bible study. Most expressed surprise that it had not been taking place in individual lives and sorrow that this should have been happening irrespective of the pandemic.

Deficient Anthropology and Theology

While every participant agreed that they had observed some lack of the fruit of the Spirit in the conduct of church members toward each other, three of them discussed the behavior of Christians toward outsiders. These three correlated the lack of a strong biblical anthropology with the vitriolic hatred directed toward those outside the church. All three veteran pastors agreed that in the duration of their ministries they have never seen Christians exhibit such fear of and animosity toward secular people as they are doing now in this polarized environment.

Martin conveyed that when he communicates with congregants he hears particular language that asserts the conviction, “Secular people hate you and want to do you great

harm. If you don't fight back as hard as you can you are going to be destroyed." Three pastors, Carl, Martin, and Wallace, all talked about ways in which they saw a lack of understanding of the life of Jesus in the gospels and an inability to pray for or even tolerate those with whom one disagrees. For these participants, the antipathy was just another demonstration of a lack of devotion to the exhortation of scripture. Martin said that in teaching about what the Christian's response to the secular culture should be, he is trying to get people to see that "Jesus was never shocked, repulsed or frantic about anything he encountered in the culture." The fact that this attitude is far from true of contemporary Christians indicates to these pastors that their people are not being shaped and formed by the character of Jesus because "they are not *participating in* the life of Jesus in the scriptures." Instead, many are being shaped and formed into the identity of Christian nationalism which sees everyone who disagrees as the enemy and every issue as a culture war in which the adversary must be beaten into submission by arguments won.

Adhering to the theme of being formed into the likeness of Jesus, Carl added, "I hear people say all the time that when Christ came into the world he came in weakness. He came humbly. But I just don't think they really believe it." In a display of humor, he added, "You know I think a lot of Christians think humility is a cold that Jesus caught and then he got over it." Two other pastors commented in agreement that although Christians may pay homage to the biblical truths of Christ as servant, what they want now is for Jesus to "get it over with," show up and demolish their political opponents in a display of the same contempt *they* feel toward them. There is a denial of the true character of the Jesus of the gospels and an overwhelming desire to see him as the

apocalyptic warrior coming to annihilate all whom they consider evil. Most of the pastors have identified a distinctive theme of Manichaeism in the minds of their congregants who are involved in Christian nationalism, many unwittingly. The language of “a constant war between good and evil” is prevalent, with the word “evil” as the primary designation of anyone with whom they disagree on cultural issues. Each participant expressed in his own words the theory that if Christians could be reminded that a “humble, serving posture is how salvation came into the world in Jesus,” that could perhaps have the potential to change their view of how they are to be present in this deeply divided, broken world. As Morris contributed, “Who better to break through this cycle of grievance than those who worship a Savior who took upon himself the ultimate grievance inflicted upon him and then asked his Father to forgive those who inflicted it?” Rather, some of these pastors are convinced that Christian nationalists might be the “biggest grievance faction” of them all. Instead of being conformed to Christ in the fellowship of his sufferings, those participating wittingly or unwittingly in this movement are being conformed to the anger and resentment of just one more rage-filled faction.

Misplaced Loyalty to Political Parties

Another theme of the Christian nationalist’s identity is an overzealous devotion to a political party with total fealty to party “requirements.” People who are seen as sufficiently loyal to America are often described by the word “patriot.” Several participants say they often hear phrases of identification such as, “She’s a real patriot,” or “We’ve got some real patriots in this group.” It is the label by which many Christians

distinguish those who have identified themselves as advocates of certain political beliefs and practices perceived to be “the American way.”

There are many ways partisan party involvement and loyalty are put on display and many places where that is appropriate. However, all the participants agree that church is not the place where these expressions of affiliations and factions belong. There is report among many that some of their congregants have insisted on bringing their culture war and political differences into the church and agreement among all that the church should be a place of refuge from these ideological discussions.

Tribalism

Each participant said he has observed the tribalism occurring as the movement progresses. It is true that political parties on both sides have become more entrenched than ever before. However, these participants notice that many Christians have become intimately united in community with those with whom they share no values or beliefs outside of politics. The loss of long-time friendships with brothers and sisters in Christ is not as significant to them as winning the culture wars in alliance with people with whom they share no common ethos and who actually disdain much of Christianity. This presents problems when that particular “tribal” union supplants that of the church community in which there might be some members of the opposing political party. For many congregants, it is unthinkable that they would align with people in the party of “the enemy.” Carl said he believes a type of “sorting” has already begun where there is an aversion to worshipping alongside those who do not share political views.

One participant said that in his congregation, “White evangelicals are Republicans and Republicans are white evangelicals, no matter what.” Several had noticed what one

referred to as “key rites of initiation” into these political tribes. Often the rallies, chants, banners and clothing demonstrate one has definitely “entered into the community and is accepting what the community stands for,” even if some of it is vitriolic, cruel and completely un-Christian. Martin and Morris talked at length about the fact that the outside world is looking at Christian nationalists whom it thinks represents the Church and concluding that “these people are just like us, clamoring for power to defeat their enemies.”

Lack of Tolerance for Nuance

Most of the participants agreed there is little tolerance for sermonic nuance when it comes to the Christian nationalist who is listening from the pew. Justin said it is as if they are wearing “invisible headphones that filter what I say and cause them to hear what they want to hear; or hear what they think I said.” If a pastor makes a claim that is not sufficiently hyper-conservative, (a word one used to describe the views of the extreme right), there will be strident opposition. Wallace spoke of pastors he knew who had been called “Marxists,” “woke,” “liberal,” or “progressive” simply because their people will not tolerate a nuanced way of speaking about social issues. Anger is easily triggered by a single key word that is perceived to not be in alignment with a political party’s platform. Flare-ups over “wokeness” have happened when a pastor teaches a passage from the gospels involving Jesus’ compassionate behavior toward the marginalized.

Almost all the participants agreed that they have been in “uncharted territory” for the past few years and feel “ill-equipped” for this current cultural moment. They contrasted the differences among people now to the disagreements of the past. Martin gave an example of a pastor friend of his who was preaching a decade ago on the bodily

resurrection. He said the friend was confronted after the sermon by someone who believed in a version of Gnosticism. The pastor told him that ten years ago he could easily defend the resurrection of the body in contrast to the ancient heresy of Gnosticism. He said he could do that accurately and with clarity because he was trained and equipped to teach and preach biblical doctrine. In this cultural moment, however, he said, “If a pastor preaches a very basic message out of Ephesians or Acts 6 and mentions the phrase racial reconciliation, he will be confronted by those who level accusations of critical race theorist.” One of the discouraging factors, some of these pastors feel, is that they are neither trained nor equipped adequately in the myriad of current cultural issues to be able to say, for example, “Let me explain to you what Critical Race Theory is and exactly what it is not.” That is also much of the frustration they experienced over the pandemic issues. Not every pastor was fortunate enough to have an infectious disease doctor on his Session with whom he could consult. “We are not experts in CRT and we’re not epidemiologists,” Robert expressed regarding his frustration over just two of the many contentious issues of this moment. There is an exasperation some of these participants feel because there is currently such a multitude of divisive cultural issues that congregants demand be addressed to their satisfaction. Several pastors added that if congregants are angry over an issue, they want it berated from the pulpit with a sufficient degree of anger. Samuel reported that although he has experienced a reasonableness in his congregation over many divisive issues, he has several pastor friends who have experienced very painful divisions in their churches over matters like Covid vaccines. Another reported that vaccine philosophy is often promoted by certain “hyper-

conservative” politicians who specialize in inciting hostility and whose gateway into these pastors’ churches is via highly-charged political rhetoric on social media.

Several expressed dismay at attempts by congregants to suggest that the pastor needs to take a political party’s side, insisting, “You need to put your stake in the ground.” Raymond said he was trying to get his people to understand that it is impossible to be a consistent Republican or a consistent Democrat and a Christ-centered Christian at the same time. Several others expressed that same aspiration and shared scriptures they had used which will be discussed below. They believe that some congregants have deluded themselves into thinking that their political party is completely in sync with biblical values. They agree that if Christians were truly approaching all of life’s issues with the determination to live for Christ first, then there would have to be a realistic expectation of “cancellation” by both the right and the left.

Raymond said he had observed that the churches in his area that have grown the most during the pandemic are those who have taken the most extreme position on one pole or the other while those who remain in the middle refusing to take a political stand are barely maintaining the status quo. He went on to talk about Christians who are so enmeshed in their politics that it is easier for an unbeliever to tell where they align politically than to identify what their religion is. All participants agreed that for those deeply involved in this movement, the lines have blurred to the extent that politics is superseding their faith. They now require that a pastor agree with them on every political issue or face considerable opposition. Justin added that he dealt with this problem most frequently around election time when congregants would become upset that he would not endorse a particular candidate from the pulpit, or at the very least pray for that candidate

by name. Several agreed that if that is not occurring, the pastor is seen as being “on the enemy’s side.”

A Misplaced Idea of Patriotism

The interview participants also hear the ideology expressed among congregants that America was founded as a Christian nation and must be returned to Christian leadership and Christian values. This is especially prevalent during patriotic holidays like the Fourth of July when congregants are often offended if they do not perceive the pastor as adequately dedicated to what they value about American history. Three of the participants shared anecdotal stories about the vociferous response to the removal of the American flag from sanctuaries or the relegation of it to an insufficiently prominent place. In trying to discover the reason for the deep emotions regarding the flag controversies, several participants have explored the situation more extensively in conversations with particular individuals. One participant said that after one jarring incident, he discovered a strong conflation of the idea of fighting for America and fighting for the kingdom. His conclusion was that there was a deep misunderstanding regarding the fact that “the Church has always had her martyrs but they are not the same ones who spilled their blood in battles for America.” He added, “It sure underscored to me how easily folks can mix things up.” The participants concurred that the flag disputations are a symptom of the conflation of faith and Christianity that is represented by this ideology. Justin reported a story about a congregant who was upset by a perception there was not enough deference to veterans in the worship service when the Fourth of July occurred on a Sunday.

Every participant agreed that there is an obfuscation of much of the truth with respect to the framers and founding documents and genuine confusion regarding the separation of church and state. Because of this lack of clarity, Christians often react in anger when they perceive a lack of reverence for the flag and other symbols of patriotism. Pastors are on the defensive in a continuous effort not to appear un-patriotic as they attempt to keep the focus on Jesus and his kingdom rather than the United States of America.

Lack of Knowledge

Several participants mentioned observing that there are some Christian nationalist writers and speakers who have become iconic heroes of the far right. These champions of their own version of American history have succeeded in exerting a great deal of influence over congregants. Carl explained that when a congregant reads something written by one of these revered authors, it is often the case that the congregant will not put forth the intellectual rigor to investigate the writer's specious claims. Wallace expressed, "There is a particular view of the founding of the country that needs to be corrected." Many people have been the recipients of false information and just do not have the initiative to "do the work." Again, without adequate training, it can be an overwhelming undertaking for a pastor to be required to suddenly become a "professor" of American history. Carl, with another touch of characteristic humor said, "Blowing up peoples' mythologies is dangerous work!"

Among the five pastors who commented extensively on this issue, all agreed that there is a deeply rooted national misunderstanding regarding the accomplishments the founders were trying to achieve for the governance of America. Notably, there is an

inadequate understanding of the principles of the Establishment Clause of the United States Constitution that is keenly affecting congregants' aspirations for a "Christian nation."

An aspect of the conflation of the church and the country in many well-meaning Christians' mind-sets is the misconception that the Church will fail if Americans are unsuccessful in defeating "evil and immorality" in America. Morris said he frequently encounters congregants who fear that "God is going to bring America down because of her sins." He said that for them the assumption is that America's demise means the end of the Church as well. Because so much of the language undergirding the mythology of the founding is borrowed from the Church's theological and biblical discourse, it has become easy to meld the two distinctive entities. Christian nationalist ideology contends that whatever has the power to "bring America down" can likewise destroy the Church because the fate of the Church is so inextricably tied to the fate of America.

Lack of Global Awareness of Christianity

The participants also observe an absence of the global awareness of Christianity. The three pastors who commented on this observed that some American Christians have a difficult time seeing themselves as part of the larger story of God's multi-national kingdom. Some felt the average American Christian's narrow view of the world has been a major contributor to Christian nationalism and Christian nationalism has subsequently contributed to a small view of God's global kingdom. Robert said, "Because we are Americans we think in terms of what is good for us as a country first." Several participants commented on the ways in which the "America First" sloganeering and

agenda had been detrimental to the Christian understanding of God's trans-national kingdom and contributed to the delusions of America's "special place" in God's plan.

Several shared the opinion that when people dwell constantly about what is happening in their own little world, they have a propensity to get even angrier and more grieved by the cultural circumstances surrounding them that they cannot control. Morris offered his thoughts on how that perpetual focus on grievance then helps create what Christian nationalists consider justifiable violence. He said that as he talks to congregants, he does not even see an emphasis on issues of what might be best governing policies in this small world of shared national citizenship. Rather, he sees the motivating spirit is an escalating sense of grievance and entitlement that should be biblically incomprehensible to Christians. In almost a despondent way he talked again about the Church abandoning its emphasis on spiritual formation. Sadly, shaking his head, he said poignantly and repeatedly, "This should have been our time to shine. This should have been our time to shine." The consensus among participants is that even though it is true that America is demonstrably drifting away from historic biblical values, the Christian's response should be humility and godly sorrow, not fear, grievance and violence.

Pronounced Focus on Individualism

The final concerning aspect noticeable to some participants was an individualism that completely eclipsed interest in the common good or general welfare. This theme became most apparent during the height of the pandemic when pastors were forced to navigate constantly changing public health requirements and do so in the best interest of all congregants. All participants agreed that the inordinate emphasis on individual rights

that surfaced during the pandemic had been materializing among some congregants for quite some time before Covid became an issue. The pandemic, however, presented the opportunity for the problem to manifest itself more virulently.

Lack of Concern for Others

Several participants expressed grave concern that evangelicalism in America had succumbed so thoroughly to radical individualism when the idea of it is so unbiblical. The irony that the individual rights on which the American founders focused included responsibility for the “general welfare” seems to be lost on many Christians who claim those rights as part of their own personal American freedoms with little regard for others. For these interview participants that is not even an acceptable interpretation of “rights” for secular Americans, much less Christians, who should know that there is biblically no such thing as an “unlimited” individual right. The biblical focus is always on the follower of Christ being ready to lay down his life, and his rights, for the benefit of another. Raymond said, “We have swum so long in this sea of the individualistic American mindset it is really hard for us to see ourselves [...] seems like even the reason we band together into parties is to secure power for our individual selves.” During Covid, Samuel reported that when he announced that the church would be in compliance with the county regulations he received reasonable cooperation from the congregation. He was in the minority of the participants as several of them had to contend with congregants who were much more concerned with their individual “God-given rights” or what they considered government over-reach than they were with public health or individual welfare of others. Several reported that when they closed their buildings per county regulations and initiated live streaming, the resistance was fierce. For some, just the mere announcement that they

were going to comply with the government's recommendation was a "deviation from expectations" that created heated repercussions. The most disappointing element for these pastors was the reason given for the protests. Rather than a focus on the lack of opportunity to gather together for mutual edification, worship, and prayer, the complaints centered on the weakness or cowardice of the pastors who were "yielding to a government that was trying to take away individual rights." Robert talked about the way he saw people responding to the talking points in their social media bubbles instead of asking how they could help be a good neighbor to others. Raymond expressed his observations that this self-focus has been revealed more in the past two years than he has ever seen it but that he has "realized that it has always been deep in the [American Christian's] DNA."

Morris added a thought regarding what he had observed after the death of George Floyd when he would have conversations in his church in relation to racial issues. He said, "I have seen this correlation of individualism in many areas. I have seen it for a while showing up in the individualism of Christian theology regarding race. You know, the idea that if you're not a racist *in your individual heart*, then you're okay." He went on to explain some discussions in which he had engaged regarding systemic racism after Floyd's death. He said congregants who were inclined to Christian nationalism refused to even entertain the idea of structural or systemic sin, insisting that racism consisted only of racist individuals, "bad apples." There was resentment when several of these pastors tried to bring conversations around racial reconciliation to the fore because as Martin and Raymond both said, there is a reluctance among congregants to recognize corporate sin of any kind. All agreed that the aggressive insistence on individual rights is a manifestation

of Christian nationalism that blinds Christians to the need for love of neighbor, concern for the common good and an understanding of responsibility for corporate sin.

Preservation of Status Quo

One additional characteristic observed by these participants was a strong desire to preserve material wealth and defend existing hierarchies. Raymond talked about the ways he observes a selfishness among those who are adhering to their own economic self-interest unlike in any he period he has ever witnessed. Several participants identified a culture that has caused people to gravitate toward that “which is going to preserve their own material welfare.” No political compromise is too great if it restores or retains the political power “that benefits the economy that benefits me.” Several expressed concerns that Christians, rather than leveraging political power on behalf of the disenfranchised, maintain a goal to “preserve the property and practices” of “our way of life.” Economic self-interest is very much a theme of the individualism of this ideology and any pastor who preaches otherwise is vulnerable to the label of “socialist.”

Every church except three of those represented by these participants is comprised of majority white, affluent congregants who are accustomed to being in control of almost every aspect of their lives. One of the prevalent characteristics of the demographic is preservation of the parameters which they have erected for themselves in every area. If that present state of affairs is threatened by a pastor they perceive as weak or “woke” in any way, there will be fierce opposition.

Summary of the Characteristics of Christian Nationalism Observed by Participants

Within each of the churches represented by these participants there was some evidence of the phenomenon of Christian nationalism either currently or in the past. Each one of them expressed sorrow over what they described as nothing less than idolatry in congregants who have succumbed to the various delusions of this movement. Several of these pastors described people who have lost sight of their primary identity in Christ because of the various aspects of their involvement in this dangerous ideology. The pathway out of what the participants have described as a “dark and dangerous” reality for these people is occluded by the congregants’ firm convictions that they are the ones who are on the “right side,” upholding biblical principles. Even given the blinding nature of sin, the participants have been “genuinely stunned” that such a large number of evangelical believers have been “so easily seduced by such obviously un-Christian thinking and conduct,” even to the point of “condoning or at least excusing violence.” Most agreed that this delusional conditioning happens because of biblical illiteracy, a misplaced loyalty to a political party, a misleading or mythological view of America as a Christian nation, and a pronounced focus on individual rights.

Pastors’ Methods of Confronting the Issues

The second research question sought to determine the various ways in which pastors are addressing the issues related to Christian nationalism within their congregations after determining the existence of the problem. For many of the participants there were various methods of mitigation but the three that consistently came to the forefront were preaching, elder training, and small group involvement.

Preaching and Teaching

Every participant advocated preaching and teaching as the primary avenue by which to undertake the issues. Several of them stressed teaching Jesus as he is revealed in the scriptures. They all agree that the only way to dismantle the illusory Jesus of the Christian nationalist narrative is to be true in preaching the revelation of Jesus as he is presented in the Bible and to consistently exhort congregants to take up their cross and follow him.

Communication in Preaching

Carl said he felt that the most critical aspect of the approach comes straight out of scripture where Paul counsels Timothy to gently teach those who oppose and always with deep patience. Several agreed that the posture of patience and gentleness in instruction in these matters is crucial. A congregant will determine immediately if there is what Raymond called a “harshly strident” tone. “I didn’t like your tone today,” is an actual criticism Justin reported receiving. Two of them agreed that the more conciliatory posture and tone would be congruent with the instruction of Proverbs 15:1, “a gentle answer turns away wrath.” A pastoral thought these participants expressed was that during all the outrage, consternation, and rancor in which these congregants are so thoroughly immersed, the “best thing they can have is a pastor who is transcending all of that with gentle, compassionate words each week.”

Content of Preaching

The participants each had valuable contributions regarding what should be emphasized in preaching in this current political and cultural moment. All agreed that

preaching through a gospel is essential. In commenting on the absence of congregants' familiarity with Jesus' actual person and work in the gospels, Martin's observation was something he identified as a strange "mirror image" of something that happened over a decade ago with some politically progressive churches. There had been a so-called "red-letter" movement claiming that the teachings of Jesus were to be accepted as authoritative but the rest of scripture could be rejected because "Jesus didn't say any of those other things." The strategy was common among progressives who rejected the teachings of Paul on homosexuality and were looking for justification of their beliefs in the fact that Jesus did not address the issue explicitly. Now, in an inversion of that, there are Christians who are doing something similar with the gospels. Martin said he sometimes hears from pastors who are teaching through the Sermon on the Mount and will have someone approach them and say "Well Jesus obviously couldn't have meant that!" The participants, each in his own words, expressed the thought that only through spending time with Jesus in the gospels will their people be so shaped and formed by him that through the Spirit they can potentially come to act intuitively and habitually like him. Martin declared that it was impossible to shape what he called that "thick identity" without saturation in the gospels.

One pastor expressed his thoughts on parts of the Sermon on the Mount that should be emphasized to get people to focus on their own hearts as the problem rather than what the political issues are. He said he constantly reminds his people that Jesus really meant what he said about "logs and specks." He said he tells them they can't solve any of those issues "out there" in the culture until they deal with the "logs and specks" of their own hearts.

Jesus' teaching on the kingdom of God was another topic most agreed should take priority in preaching content, especially the instruction in the book of Matthew, which one called "an internal critique of the Church." Carl went back to people's need to recognize that they are a part of something global. He said if every illustration and story is about what is happening right here in America and all they can talk about is how grieved they are about what is happening here, there is a "loss of a global perspective," which contributes to the nationalistic mind-set. Several of the participants expressed the importance of the "global perspective" of the kingdom to rectify those nationalistic beliefs. They agree that Christian nationalism has corrupted this truth with its pejorative use of the word "globalist," a key word used to describe people not seen as sufficiently concerned for America. Within this group of participants is the pastor of a multi-national church which provides translations in several languages. Because one of the aspects of Christian nationalism is a passionate anti-immigration stance, it is important for his congregants to be constantly reminded of the multi-ethnic nature of the kingdom of God.

Carl talked about a conversation in which someone had distorted the meaning of Jesus' command to disciple the nations, making it about "taking control of a nation" in a geopolitical sense, interpreting the Great Commission in terms of "creating a Christian nation." Wallace added that once you start preaching that a Christian's primary identity includes being a "member of a multi-national kingdom," you are addressing Christian nationalism in biblical terms without saying the actual words.

Most of them were equally concerned that congregations be taught the historicity of the Church, to better understand what the Church has looked like while passing through the different eras withstanding actual persecution. One pastor said he thought

that if congregants had a better historical perspective of the Church's persecution they would not be so worried about "a political party running the country they fear might deprive them of the American dream."

Because each of these participants have such a high view of the Church and its unity, several expressed thoughts regarding strengthening their peoples' ecclesiology. They believe that because American Christianity has so succumbed to radical individualism, it is imperative that people be taught what it means to be the people of God collectively. Carl said they need to be taught what it means to be "the people of God in a particular locality" and more generally speaking in the world. Robert added that "the idea of being a missional church needs to be re-inserted into their thinking," so that the "super-identity" of being in Christ together becomes the most important one.

Most agreed that a large portion of what they preach right now is with an eye to calling the church back to repentance, out of the darkness of this cultural and political movement, and they are passionate about that goal. Raymond said he had decided to just "lay the sword of the Word down and let it cut where it may." Several of them added that they could not spend any more time and energy "trying to keep a political party happy." Most of them admitted to being "absolutely exhausted."

Courage in Preaching

Courage is something that not one of these pastors claimed to have and yet it was what they asked God to give them constantly in these perilous times. Almost every one of them had an anecdote about a time they had required extraordinary courage in dealing with a situation involving Christian nationalistic thinking, speaking or conduct. Even though the vitriol is deep in this climate, most of the participants agree that the average

congregant is not aware of the intensity of the anger pastors are receiving. Morris talked about how difficult it is for pastors to “thread and unthread that complicated needle” every week. It is a rare exception for these pastors to get up to speak and not see someone registering complaints or disagreement with their body language, or to hear complaints almost immediately after a sermon, often about something that was not even said.

Most of these men said they have all been “criticized right and left.” They each had a different version of the same response to criticism: “I will preach the Bible and not be dependent on the praises of men.” Several enjoined that it was a lesson they had to relearn in painful ways in the past few years.

Elder Training

A common thread running through several participants’ thoughts on addressing the problems of this moment was the necessity of teaching and training elders. Each pastor expressed the belief that a fundamental requirement was a Session with a “balanced understanding of the issues” willing to help the pastor “bring people face to face with Christ as he is revealed in the scriptures” when problems arise. Several expressed the sentiment that they would not have been able to deal with some of the difficult issues with which they have been burdened had they not had “well-formed elders.” Carl said that because the work these pastors are doing involves “subverting idols with what I’m saying about Jesus and the kingdom,” it is imperative that they have a supportive, well-trained, spiritually formed Session.

Other Methods

There were other thoughts conveyed by several of the participants in relation to how they address these issues. Carl said that in addition to teaching and training elders, he recommended having key people in leadership positions across the church who are non-officers. He believes people should be put in place who are able to “salt the soil of the congregation” by asking good, thought-provoking questions about the different concerns. Justin has placed people in “advisory” positions who are well-versed on cultural topics, able to give prudent answers when questioned, and pass along informed counsel when controversy comes to the surface in casual conversations in the church.

Several pastors said that they had brought in “outside influencers,” respected Christian leaders who felt the freedom to use certain words and approach topics that might be controversial. Samuel described it as “a voice who becomes the lightning rod taking the pressure off” the senior pastor and “starting the conversation.” He said there are certain outside leaders who can introduce words or thoughts into the vocabulary of a congregation that a senior pastor “might lose his job over.” He described them as well-respected leaders who could come in from a different context and define key words and ideas and his people would be likely to take it as from a biblical perspective and not a socio-political one. Several participants had a version of this idea with different leaders coming in to “set up the discussion” of these difficult cultural topics. Several use Wednesday nights for these types of meetings to have a forum in more of a dialogical format.

Two participants, Wallace and Raymond, contributed that they have found it helpful to address the cultural events as they occur in real time through recorded and posted videos. For example, rather than preach a sermon on the Capitol insurrection on

the Sunday morning following January 6, they refused to “be handicapped by chasing the news.” Raymond expressed that he did not want to be indebted to the news to “shape the agenda of preaching” on a Sunday. Each of these veteran pastors expressed that his obligation is to preach “eternal principles that will outlast these current events.” But because they each felt a responsibility to address an event as aberrant and confusing as the Capitol riot, they created a video following the occurrence to discuss what had transpired. Each one said they then referenced it on Sunday as something that would provide more discussion if people wanted to avail themselves of it.

Four of these participants are published authors whose writings are contributing a great deal to the clarification of Christian nationalism and several of them have regular weekly or monthly publications and podcasts to address the prevailing and ongoing controversies.

Summary of Pastors’ Methods of Confronting the Issues

Each one of these participants has such a high view of the unity of the church that they have determined they will always confront issues that threaten that unity. They also have a vision for cultural engagement that has always been a fundamental part of their ministry. They feel a need to address this phenomenon from the pulpit, from their praying and from creative activities, implicitly and sometimes explicitly issuing the warning that Christian nationalism is attempting to take Christians in a “non-gospel direction.” They have an urgency to strengthen their peoples’ identity in Christ and grow their knowledge of his kingdom in efforts to combat this phenomenon. They all agree that when it comes

to the ways in which Christians should engage in politics, there is a profound lack of theological formation.

Each of these men is making a concerted effort using every tool at his disposal to ensure that he is covering the necessary aspects of “what a Christian needs to know, what a Christian needs to believe, and what a Christian needs to do to be a well-formed follower of Christ in every arena of life,” especially in this particular cultural and political moment.

Responses from Troubled Congregants

The third research question addressed what kinds of congregants’ responses the participants experienced, after addressing divisive issues. Because congregants’ anger is so pervasive and emotions are frequently intense, it is often the case that they have only perceived that a pastor addressed an issue. Many congregants are looking for any evidence of a pastor’s “likely” stance on a topic. Justin reported that he quoted Martin Lloyd-Jones in a sermon given 50 years ago and was accused of being “woke.”

The prevailing anger leads to assertive, impassioned behavior. Morris said that a pastor friend told him that there could be someone in his church dying of cancer and simultaneously be so angry at him for disagreeing with his politics that he would not allow him at his bedside.

Making Complaints Known

Angry Emails

Most participants said that they can usually anticipate when there will be an inbox containing angry emails on a Monday morning but there are occasional surprises that are so vitriolic they could not have imagined them. Email is usually the correspondence of choice for the angry congregant but there was strong consensus that none of the participants would return communications using that method. They all agreed it is just too difficult to enter productive dialogue over email when the “dominant tenor of the email is rage and the ‘all-caps’ are howling.” Several participants reported being labeled “Marxist,” “coward,” “woke,” “compromiser” or even “betrayers of Jesus” because of their perceived insufficient concern about some political issue or refusal to endorse a candidate.

Each participant said they refused to respond to emails with engagement or “sparring matches” on the topic. They often invited the congregant into the office or called the person on the phone. If they responded with email it was to inform the congregant that the email had been forwarded to the Session to whom the pastor was accountable. One participant said he found that an effective deterrent.

Social Media Posts

In the current climate, people are much more likely to vocalize their anger publically on social media. As Morris expressed that what was “formerly a rant against the pastor at the dinner table is now a diatribe on Facebook.” Several of the participants expressed their dismay at the number of “committed political hobbyists” they had among

their congregants who would furiously express on social media that they were leaving the church because their pastor was “so completely misguided on the issues” in which the congregant had a profound interest.

Because social media participation can be so misleading, one of the challenges for the participants is determining the actual extent of the angry faction. Several of these pastors said they are learning is that “the volume of the criticism is often not a proxy for the popularity of the criticism.” Identifying the “leaders of an angry faction” is easy; identifying the “extent of the angry faction” is more difficult. They expressed that they have come to understand that they had typically been responding to the loudest voices but have learned that sometimes the factions are much smaller than they thought.

What has been difficult for them to discern is which congregants belong to what Morris calls “the exhausted majority,” the large group that is fatigued and disgusted by the polarization and rage, but stays quietly in the middle. It is a dynamic within the church that mirrors that of the culture at large. Justin expressed a desire to devise strategies to “draw those out” who have remained silent. His concern is that they will so tire of the animosity and division that they will just give up on the church. It is a concern many of these participants share.

In-Person Confrontation

There are some congregants who do not hesitate to approach these pastors in person after something is said in a sermon with which they heartily disagree. The participants report that these encounters almost never involve a theological issue, but fall into the category of political or cultural topics. One of them said he longed “for the days when someone just wanted to argue about predestination.” Regrettably, a couple

participants report regular confrontations by certain congregants after sermons and one who even described a threatening congregant's disruption during a sermon that required security assistance. Such is the level of the vitriol among church members influenced by Christian nationalist ideas in this tempestuous moment.

Leaving the Church

Sadly, some congregants are doing more than just expressing their frustrations; they are leaving their churches. Each of these participants have had congregants leave their church because of cultural and political issues. Samuel had a pastor friend who lost 20% of his church during the pandemic to a church just down the street that did not require masks. All but two of the participants said they had congregants who were determined to treat Covid as a political issue rather than a public health problem over which Christians should unite. The many ways in which it was politicized and the harsh rhetoric surrounding it that tore communities, churches and families apart, was extremely discouraging to these pastors and in the words of one, "made for a very hard season for people in ministry." The disheartening fact that church members have politicized and prioritized issues like the pandemic and the 2020 election to the extent that they will leave a church over them has been extremely frustrating for these participants.

Inciting Conflict

One of the most effective ways to disrupt a congregation is a method that has been in use since the first century church. Half of these participants report they have had congregants who do not loudly voice complaints, do not leave the church, but instead just

quietly and subversively go about stirring up dissension within the church. These are the people who begin to plant seeds of doubt as to whether the pastor is “okay,” that some people are “concerned about him,” that he might be becoming a little too “woke.” Martin expressed that he has found that 10% of the congregation is able to control the whole congregation if they put enough effective psychological methods in place, another mirror of the culture at large. With the multitudinous matters of contention from which to choose in this malevolent moment, these types of congregants can easily indulge in these practices and if unchecked, can wreak havoc on a church.

Summary of Response from Angry Congregants

It bears repeating that in this cultural moment there are copious issues over which church members are combative and it is pastors who are the primary recipients of that truculence. Evaluating ways to temper and even resolve this anger takes up an inordinate amount of some of these participants’ time and is taking a toll on them emotionally.

Samuel said that even though the Barna group reports that over 30% of pastors are contemplating a different line of work, “To me it feels like a lot more than that.” However, for these participants the consensus of their sentiments is some version of what Wallace said, “No matter how small this island gets, I’m going to hang on to these gospel truths and keep defending this island.” Each of these pastors has a deep desire for the American church to repent of this nationalistic fervor and “return to its first love.”

Encouraging Signs

The final research question sought to determine what is working, or will work in the future if pastors can continue to be longsuffering and persevere in their calling. The phenomenon of Christian nationalism did not manifest itself overnight and it will not dissipate quickly either. Martin said, and others agree, that it is probably going to happen over time “organically within local communities” where there is an intentional effort to reframe and redefine who the people of God are. Each participant has seen some promising signs.

Generational Signs

Several of the participants talked about generational shifts they are seeing that give them hope for the Church’s future. Those who addressed this see great opportunities ahead.

No Nominal Christianity

One aspect of that shift is that there are generational differences in terms of how millennial and Gen Z evangelicals relate a cultural identity to a Christian identity. These pastors observe that younger generations would not embrace a cultural or political Christianity the way many of their parents have done. As Robert said, “They’re either all-in Christians or they’re not in.” They may choose to be non-affiliated or “nones” at the present time but they will not engage in nominal Christianity. Martin likened it to Christianity in places like China. He said there is no problem with Christian nationalism in China because to be a follower of Christ a person is going to “put every other identity

on the line.” It would be unthinkable to Chinese Christians to conflate patriotism with faith. In much the same way, people in these two younger generations may not *be* Christians but if they *become* Christians, they will be Christ-followers “full throttle.”

Curiosity about Faith

Martin taught a class on politics at a major mid-western university recently and reports that the students were full of curiosity and questions, as he was the first evangelical they had ever met. He said these students, who are studying to be ambassadors and elected officials, were not asking him questions about where he saw evangelicalism headed going into the 2024 caucuses. They wanted to know things like what he really thought about hell and what it is like to be somebody who really believes a dead body came back to life. Several of the pastors talked about the genuine curiosity they encounter in the unbelieving millennial and Gen Z generations and that gives them great hope for the future of the Church. Some of them conceded that the citizenry of the Church may look very different in the generations to come but most commented that had always been the case throughout the changing ages.

Small Scale Solutions

Pastoral Care Groups

There have been cohorts and groups of pastor friends who have been accountability partners and mentors since the early days of the Church. But these participants report that each one of them are in at least one and several of them are in more than one group of men who meet regularly and encourage each other through this

season. Without exception, these men say the difficult duration of the last few years has been the most challenging of their entire ministry. As Wallace said about his group, it helps us “gird up the loins of our minds and get on with business.” Another added that they become “analysts” when they are together and are better able to scrutinize this complex moment in which they all find themselves. Raymond said they never resolve much about the issues but “it sure makes me feel more normal.” He chuckled when he said it and then continued with the thought that it is extremely comforting when pastors can be together and “find that everyone in the room is experiencing the very same problems.” He went on to say that the veteran pastors started the groups for the younger men but then discovered “the veterans needed it more.” He said that in this new environment even little things are a comfort, “like sending out a group text when something extraordinary happens in the culture to say ‘Are you going to say anything about this and if so how much?’” These men would contend that they are not part of a counter “tribe;” they are just trying to find ways to persevere in their calling in these most difficult of times.

Exhausted Majority

It bears repeating that there is a very large contingency of each of these congregations that is disgusted with the polarization and anger. The privilege and responsibility of pastoring them is an encouragement to each one of these participants. As Carl said, “This is a time when pastors get the distinct privilege of being able to tell those who are not the loud voices in the room that Jesus is a beautiful, wonderful Savior and their sins are forgiven.” Each of these participants is aware of the great opportunity of being ministers of the gospel at this chaotic time to pastor the quiet and hurting ones who

need them desperately amid all the bellicosity. Each of these participants had his own version of what that privilege means to him.

Large Scale Solution

Robert had a reminder that Jesus said so many things that the Church of the 21st century needs to go back and re-learn. He said priority in this moment should be to remember that “Jesus, the Apostles, the early church, none of them saw their calling as saving the culture or fixing the government.” He advised that “It’s good to remember as they did that the power and glory of Christianity is not lost when Christians are not in control of the culture.” A Christian nationalist mind-set makes Christians wring their hands because they think they are “losing” if their political party is not in power or if progressives are winning the culture wars. This ideology makes Christians believe that the only important goal is “winning, and that at all costs.” But as Raymond continued, “The Church can’t lose; Christianity can’t lose and we know we are succeeding if we are just doing what Christ left us here to do.”

Summary of Encouraging Signs

According to these participants, there is much about which to be encouraged. For one thing, in relation to the younger generations, the church is going to move from being controlled by older white evangelicals and as it does there is reason to believe that much of this movement will go away. Research shows that older white evangelicals comprise much of the Christian nationalist mind-set.

Another reassurance is that when the problems for pastors seem insurmountable, the gracious gift of fellowship is still there for them. But the most important reason for optimism is the reminder Carl gave when he said, “The culture and politics are the shifting sand. They are not the Rock. The message that empowers us is that Jesus has promised to be with his people until the end of the age, until every disciple has been made.” These participants are each very grateful that they have been given the distinct privilege of being the disciple-makers.

Summary of Findings

This chapter examined the challenges encountered by those who have identified some effects of Christian nationalist ideology in their churches. It probed the ways in which these Christian leaders are observing this ideology, how they are addressing the fissures it has caused, the strategies with which they are dealing with the aggressive responses that are present in many of their congregants, and finally the means of encouragement of which they avail themselves. Each of the participants in this study loves the ever-present, ever-advancing kingdom of God which is on its unstoppable, eternal trajectory. However, they also each have a deep burden for the American church that appears to have forgotten that any church can have “its lampstand removed by Jesus.” They are grieved by so many Christians who have conflated their faith with their nationalistic pride and are laboring under the deceitful ideology of Christian nationalism. They believe that “many American Christians have exchanged the truth of God for a lie” and are deeply entrenched in idolatry. They are impassioned by their sense of

responsibility to restore a Christian identity to those whom they feel might be “the greatest threat to the witness of the Church in the United States today.”

Chapter 5

Discussion and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to understand how pastors can strengthen a Christian identity in congregants that will supersede that of Christian nationalism. In chapter two, the review of literature illuminated the challenges encountered in the areas of identity markers that pervade this ideology, the correlation between Christian nationalism and information illiteracy, and the lack of an understanding of principled pluralism causing an inability to coexist with those who are “other.”

The following research questions guided the research.

1. What are some of the characteristics of Christian nationalism that pastors are observing within their congregations?
2. What are some of the ways pastors are addressing what they are observing?
3. What are the some of the ways troubled congregants are responding to pastors?
4. What encourages pastors who are dealing with this?

Summary of the Study and Findings

This study reviewed relevant literature in three areas and analyzed interview data from six senior pastors, one director of theology and culture for an international Christian publication, and one former religious liberties attorney who is currently a politics and religion commentator for a media organization.

Literature Review Findings

Several important conclusions emerged from the literature after many authors, historians, social scientists and researchers revealed the most prevalent characteristics within the movement of Christian nationalism. Whether an author or researcher was a Christian or a secularist, there were no substantial differences in their assumptions in relation to these distinguishable identity markers. An individual writer or researcher might have emphasized one trait over another, but they were in broad agreement in their overriding concerns regarding the implications of this ideological movement for society at large and the Church in particular.

The High Calling of the Church

The fragmentation and fissures so evident in the society are forming as well in the American church, and the consensus of the literature is that the trajectory of this dangerous ideology makes restoration untenable unless there is recognition of its dangers and a communal desire to restore unity in the body of Christ. Every Christian author agreed the remedy must begin with the people of God. Even the secular researchers recognize that one of the reasons for the growth of this movement is that the morality formation once emanating from the Church is no longer inspiring and motivating the public at large. There can be no doubt that this deficiency is due in large part to so many Christians' turning their relentless attention to winning culture wars instead of carrying out the call of Christ to imitate him in the culture and be his agents of blessing to the world. In Matthew 5:13-15 Jesus says this to his disciples, "You are the salt of the earth... You are the light of the world... Let your light shine before others *so that they*

may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.” [Emphasis mine] Jesus was not merely implying a possibility for his followers, nor was he even propounding a promise that this would happen in the future. He was stating an indicative regarding who they were and what the call on their lives entailed because of who they were. In their role as light of the world, Christ’s followers are to take up the mantle of the one who is the true Light of the world in imitation of him. They are to be constantly aware of the telos of the upward trajectory of the imperative he issues in these verses in Matthew 5. The goal of all of the Christian’s deeds is that the watching world will see what Christians do and how they do it, and glory will be given to the Father in heaven. The same telos had been expressed in Deuteronomy 4:6-7 when Moses articulates to the ancient Israelites what the results will be if they follow the statutes and rules of their call in the Promised Land: “...Keep them and do them, for that will be your wisdom and your understanding *in the sight of the people*, who, when they hear...will say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.’ For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the LORD our God is to us.” [Emphasis mine] Jesus and the New Testament writers were always reminding his followers that there is, as Michael Williams says, “an audience watching this play.”

The Effects of Ahistorical Narratives

As stated above, one of the most ubiquitous elements is the propensity of Christian nationalists to assign to America an ahistorical narrative of a glorious and victorious Christian past. The predominant idea is that America was founded as a Christian nation and that former status must be reclaimed if the country expects to continue to experience the blessings of God. There is a feeling of mistrust of the current

institutions and leadership and a nostalgic yearning to return to the former “greatness,” and reverse the current state of “crisis” in America.

Closely related to this concept is the near veneration of the founding fathers and insistence that they were Christians intent on inextricably linking the Christian faith to civic life. There is a deficiency of knowledge among Christians regarding the actual religious beliefs of the founders and the ways in which these beliefs informed their politics. The extreme irony of the emphasis Christians now place on the morality and religious beliefs of the founders is seen when contrasted to so many Christian’s complete lack of concern regarding the moral character of their contemporary politicians.

There has been considerable research conducted on the types of political candidates who forge a rhetorical bond with the participants of Christian nationalist thinking. The candidate must portray himself as a “strongman,” an authoritarian type capable of defeating the enemy and taking back control of the nation, re-establishing pride and honor in the country. However, in an absurd twist, the research revealed that it is the politician himself who insinuates this perceived loss of greatness and who generates a sense of ontological insecurity among the electorate in order to render it dependent on him alone. These grievance-filled narrative devices play most assiduously on conservatives’ fears of particular forms of social disintegration, economic deterioration, and immigration, fears which may not correspond to reality.

The Results of Information Illiteracy

The literature also disclosed a distinct correlation between Christian nationalism and information illiteracy. The propensity to believe and disburse lies and conspiracy theories is one of the key drivers of this movement. The research has shown that the

proliferation of radical online communities has contributed more to the fragmentation and political and social dysfunction in America than any other feature of contemporary society. As Jonathan Haidt, who has been cited above, said in his most recent article regarding social media communities, “When our public square is governed by mob dynamics unrestrained by due process, we don’t get justice and inclusion; we get a society that ignores context, proportionality, mercy, and truth.”¹⁶² The “enabling and activating lies,” the misguided patriotism, and the vitriolic rhetoric have all deeply impacted the Church because of the involvement of evangelicals with this un-Christian ideology. Weaponization of words, conspiratorial thinking and outright gullibility are all characteristic of Christian nationalist conduct and, according to the literature reviewed, have been inordinately impacted by the technological developments of social media.

The Fear of Loss

One of the more distressing findings from the literature was the way in which Christian nationalism’s exclusivity and sense of superiority impedes harmonious living in a pluralistic society like the United States. The narratives that this ideology has constructed have given rise to a fear of the “Great Replacement,” an imagined threat of replacement by immigrants and minority groups that has achieved iconic status with white Christian nationalists. One of the primary focuses of the movement is the creation of an identity of victimhood by establishing that the glorious privileges of the past are in the process of being lost to “foreign actors” brought into America for the purpose of forming a new electorate. As Homolar and Lofflman report, “undeserving ‘others’ such

¹⁶² Haidt, “Why the Past 10 Years of American Life Have Been Uniquely Stupid,” April 11, 2022.

as immigrants and ‘traitors’ are the culprits behind the loss and active destruction of national greatness, dignity, and freedom.”¹⁶³ However, as the conspiracy narrative unfolds further, even the “others” are being controlled by the progressive left trying to replace native-born Americans with immigrants who will agree with their political views. When a group of people inhabit a fantasy of “replacement” with an irrational focus on self-protection, the research reveals that they will mobilize within the shared identity they believe they possess and passionately malign all outsiders. The contempt against any who would disrupt their perceived status quo leads to avoidance of others at best and violence against them at worst.

Interview Findings

The interviews revealed that many pastors in evangelical churches in the southern United States are experiencing some manifestation of Christian nationalism in their congregations. There are varying degrees of the identifiable aspects but even pastors who were unaware of the phenomenon prior to the pandemic and the 2020 election have been witnessing the effects of it over the past two years. They voiced concern that Christian nationalism is attempting in various ways to take evangelicals in many “non-gospel directions,” including violence.

The Effects of Biblical Illiteracy

One of the most pervasive characteristics exposed has been biblical illiteracy among congregants. There was collective disappointment among the participants

¹⁶³ Homolar and Löfflmann, “Populism and the Affective Politics of Humiliation Narratives.”

regarding the level of spiritual maturity they had witnessed among many of their members. This revelation came to light as the pastors began to recognize some congregants' unbiblical conduct in response to the critical and consequential events of the past few years, particularly regarding Covid and the post-election milieu. There was also a degree of surprise for pastors that the spiritual formation of particular people did not correspond to the number of years these congregants had been followers of Jesus. Several pastors reported that their congregants exhibited conduct that was not "biblically informed," leading these participants to believe that "political persuasions and preferred pundits" have taken influential precedence over the authority of scripture in their congregants' lives.

Relational Dissonance and Partisan Expectations

They have also seen a fragmentation of friendships and even families and a "sorting" into tribes based on ideological preferences. Just as the literature divulged, the interview participants have experienced the effects of the intense patriotism and loyalty to the particular historical narrative about which many of their congregants are so passionate, especially prevalent around seasons of elections and national patriotic holidays.

In regard to their own preaching, several reported an expectation from some congregants that the pastor should adjudicate from the pulpit on controversial political issues. The predicament in which that sentiment places the pastor is obviously onerous in this profoundly polarized environment. Another issue that has caused bewilderment among these men is an observation of a waning lack of concern for global Christianity. Several described a dearth of awareness or interest of the local church as a part of the

larger story of God’s multi-national kingdom. They attributed this in part to the disproportionate emphasis being placed on nationalistic isolationism among Christian nationalist-leaning congregants. Closely related to that was a discernible self-centeredness in individuals, in particular since the onset of the pandemic. They associate this trait with what they called the “hyper-individualism” so prevalent in the conservative culture that has been exacerbated by Covid-related government restrictions.

Corrective Procedures

Once the problems associated with Christian nationalism had been identified in particular congregations, several pastors began to develop methods or strategies by which to address them. The fundamental method, as expected, is through preaching, especially expository preaching of the gospels and epistles. However, several disclosed that they have never experienced the level of criticism of preaching they are sustaining in this current cultural moment. They attribute this to the undercurrent of anger and a heightened sense of combativeness among congregants over the pastor’s use of certain words or cultural terms which contradict or dissent from congregants’ convictions.

Regarding the question of how congregants respond when they perceive the pastor has addressed a particularly thorny issue, several said that it did not matter if they had actually addressed it; the key is what was perceived. If a negative perception occurs, reaction is irascible. One pastor conveyed, “What used to be a rant around the dinner table is now a diatribe on social media.” Another said he longed for the days when the debate was only about theological matters.

Despite the mutual dilemmas and frustrations, there was optimism in each of these participants. Each understands the strong elements in society that want to

weaponize the church for political gain and they are determined to stand against that endeavor. Without exception, they have resolved not to allow themselves to be co-opted by the Christian nationalist “wing” of their congregations. They are determined to be prophetic voices of truth that protect the church of the Lord Jesus Christ from being seen by the watching world as merely an extension of political partisanship.

Discussion of Findings

Identity Markers of Christian Nationalism

The literature surveyed agreed that Christian nationalism advocates that the government should promote and protect America’s cultural identity, that which provides meaning and purpose to American lives, and that Christianity should define that identity. Christian nationalists, although that is not a title by which they would self-identify, believe that the government has a responsibility to take active steps to privilege Christianity in the public square. Those leaning into this ideology would have government define America as a Christian nation, with Christian values and leaders as essential to the official culture of the nation.

The following characteristics and subsequent effects of Christian nationalism were revealed by the literature and discussed by the interview participants.

Political Power and Division

As we observed from the literature, Christian nationalism has a goal of procuring and maintaining political power, invoking the name of Christ for a political agenda, and to paraphrase Paul D. Miller, proclaiming that its program is *the* political program for

every Christian. Miller added that it treats “the message of Jesus as a tool of political propaganda and the church as the handmaiden and cheerleader of the state.”¹⁶⁴ However, extensive research concludes that there is only one political party that has made Christianity a source of its partisan identity and attempted to make the church its “handmaiden.” David Campbell’s carefully researched conclusions on the perils of politicized religion reveal the contrast, “The other party has – and almost by default – come to be associated with secularism.”¹⁶⁵ The irony of these identifications is that, as the literature showed, many people now claiming the identity of Evangelical never attend church and have no interest in religious issues. Activists like Christopher Rufo, mentioned above, never address the biblical justification for any of the causes they champion, even when pressed. The “new right” is motivated by power, not Christ-centered principles or concerns and Christians desirous of that power are intertwining themselves with an American conservatism that is an ever-increasing distortion of Christian ideals.

For all their symbols, posturing and praying at the January 6 Capitol insurrection, the judicial interviews concluded that the participating Christian nationalists did not have deep religious views. Many now self-identify with the label of Evangelical because they are drawn to its association with a political party. As one interview participant reported regarding his congregation “White evangelicals are Republicans and Republicans are white evangelicals, no matter what else they are.” In the 1970’s, forty percent of

¹⁶⁴ Miller, “What Is Christian Nationalism?”

¹⁶⁵ Campbell, “The Perils of Politicized Religion.”

evangelicals were Republican. Currently those who claim both labels stand at seventy percent.

However, as one of the pastors observed, “It is impossible to adhere with consistency to a Republican or Democrat agenda and be a Christ-centered Christian at the same time.” Christians who lean toward Christian nationalist thinking have deluded themselves into thinking that their political party is completely in sync with biblical values and in this climate, they will seek out churches that are politicizing Christianity in ways favorable to their party and its candidates. In these churches, Christian nationalism turns the identity of “Christian” into nothing more than a brand or modifier describing a particular type of nationalism that finds spiritual nourishment from partisan activism.

Multiple streams of research agree with Campbell’s conclusion that, “The more religion is wrapped up in partisan politics the more it loses its prophetic potential.”¹⁶⁶ The church alone has been given the authorization to proclaim the gospel and carry the standards of Jesus into the culture. This cannot be said of any other institution, including and especially political parties. *All* political parties champion causes that are often unjust and antithetical to Jesus’ character, teaching and conduct. For instance, pro-life Christians have been conditioned to believe that issues of life refer narrowly only to abortion. Biblically, issues of life are far more comprehensive than that, presenting the truth that all people are made in the image of God and are to be treated with love, justice and mercy for the entirety of life. The Bible presents a holistic picture of life in which God’s people love their neighbors and in which every image bearer of God is a neighbor. But the literature and pastors agree that racial prejudice, economic inequality, and callousness

¹⁶⁶ Campbell.

toward immigrants and refugees are now such an integral part of the current culture of partisan combat that it is difficult for Christians who desire to reach out in love to certain neighbors to do so without drawing ire from their political tribe. It is equally difficult for the watching world to correlate the loud Christian defiance protesting any challenge to autonomy they witnessed during the height of the pandemic, with the love Christians claim to have for the least of God's people.

The tribalism and allegiance to political parties instead of their Christian community that pastors are now observing in their churches comports with the research that shows support for Christian nationalism demands complete allegiance and ultimately exclusion of its opponents. The fissures that pastors are witnessing is among people whose primary identity was once unity with Christ and each other who are now divided over irreconcilable partisan views. It bears repeating that the pastors report that there are individuals in their churches who cannot come to terms with a friend who might not have voted for the "pro-life" candidate for President because of that candidate's immorality. There are those who find it impossible to believe that a Christian would take a biblical stand on any issue other than abortion. Biblical issues like mercy, justice, and how to contextualize the gospel are lightning rods that create jarring relational dissonance.

As reported above, Michael Graham, who has done extensive research into this fracturing, breaks down the provocative issues that have dominated the past five to six years. His research concludes that Christians who had always thought their bonds were missional and theological are now finding that they were increasingly cultural and political. The many ways in which every cultural issue was politicized, from the death of George Floyd, to Covid restrictions, to January 6, and everything in between, and the

discord in how people processed these issues is now very evident. Because of that palpability and the overriding partisanship that animates many Christians, Graham says many are becoming more and more averse to worshipping and fellowshiping with those who disagree with them along ideological lines. Identity in Christ and unity in Him are now of secondary importance to those who lean toward Christian nationalist ideology. Several of the interview participants reported they had congregants for whom politics has so superseded their religion that it is much easier for an outsider to identify where they align politically than to ascertain if they are a Christ-follower.

The pastors agreed that much Christian conduct today mitigates against any recognition by unbelievers of the outworking of the fruit of the Holy Spirit in God's people. As one of the interview participants said to me, "A relationship can tolerate enormous amounts of difference when the fruit of the Spirit is present and effusive." This is of course, also true of a church community. When the dominant characteristic of a particular church is the fruit of the Spirit working itself out in relationships, there will be love of the brothers and sisters and tolerance in relation to these secondary issues. But when the spirit of this partisan polarized age is prioritized and politics becomes the source of the primary identity unity is stifled.

We were informed by Mott in chapter two that a lust for political power is an idolatrous corruption. We were reminded in the biblical framework section of that chapter that Jesus pointed to this truth when he rebuked James and John for their desire to sit on his right and left hand when he came into his kingdom. Patiently explaining the kingdom behavior that is antithetical to pagan lust for power, Jesus exhorted his disciples to aspire to be servants who imitate his life. Almost every pastor interviewed spoke of the

encouragement they received by reading and re-reading Jesus' patient teaching of the upside-down ethics of his kingdom to his nationalistic disciples. To the man, they are grieved by the precipitous lack of understanding in their congregants of these once-familiar principles. It bears repeating that both the literature and the interview participants expressed sentiments that the Church through the ages has been very effective at equipping people to deal with many of life's issues, marriage, parenting, vocation, and education among others. But when it comes to faithful civic engagement in politics, followers of Jesus have been ill-prepared; they miscomprehend how to be involved without being idolatrous.

Insufficient Perspectives of American History

The literature revealed that Christian nationalists have a highly selective knowledge of America's past and a shame-centric perspective for their narrative of the present. Christian nationalism is a "legend-building" movement that emphasizes some truths and filters out many important ones. I found one of the most enlightening new terms ascribed to the conversation about America in this ideology to be "populist humiliation discourse," coined by Alexandra Homolar and Georg Lofflman in their excellent research. It is their identification of the nationalist narrative that America is fundamentally weakened and disadvantaged in the present, but glorious and most assuredly Christian in the past. If this is true, as Christian nationalists believe it is, then of course the intuitive, reactionary impulse in this ideology is to "make America great again." But the Christian's goal must be to engage in civic affairs with a demonstration of Christ-likeness that draws people to the greatness of Jesus as they work with *all* citizens for civil improvement.

Ahistorical Version of the Past

The movement's romanticized narrative of America's past asserts that she was founded as a Christian nation in which Christianity and civil society would be inextricably woven and the country would experience the unique blessings of God as she lived in accordance with his covenant. According to this ideology, that essential aspect of America has been lost and must be recovered or God will ultimately withdraw his grace from the nation. It is Christian nationalism's own unique version of the prosperity gospel that turns God into a vending machine who will provide Americans with status, protection and well-being if we behave in a certain cultural and moral way. But it is incumbent on Christians to remember that we are living in the tension of the kingdom of God that has been inaugurated but not yet consummated. We are to take hold of the truths of Psalms 2, Psalm 110, Matthew 28, and many other parts of scripture that tell us that the enthronement of our Messiah King is happening right now as he rules in the midst of his enemies.

The interview participants agreed that there is a deeply rooted misunderstanding among many of their congregants regarding the history of America. One pastor said there was not only a lack of knowledge but an unwillingness to do the work required to invalidate the narratives of self-taught historians who have become iconic figures in the movement but have no actual background or training in history. Because of a propensity for gullibility on this topic, it is a common occurrence for congregants to fall prey to presentations of the American founding that are a distortion of reality. One of the interview participants decried the fact that he was frequently on the defensive, answering for word choices perceived as un-patriotic because they did not match the rendition of those of the heroes of Christian nationalism. One of the interview participants lamented

that most congregants did not seem to have the “intellectual rigor” to invest in verifying the information offered by these un-credentialed historians.

There are many reasons these false views of American history are such a destructive error for Christians. Primarily, they put the humanistic, naturalistic views of the founding principles on equal footing with the word of God, which, to say the least, does a disservice to the scriptures. This distortion of the actual revelation of scripture discourages Christians from the critical biblical thinking necessary for an informed analysis of civic matters that is independent of the prevailing values of the culture of America’s past at any time in her history.

An uncritical acceptance of a sentimentalized history “conjures images of a glorious past to demean the present, fostering a fantasy of national greatness and belonging that is linked to shared feelings of resentment, pride, and nostalgia.”¹⁶⁷ Unfortunately, these mixed emotions fuel the narrative that white Christians, those with the “shared past” are the “true heirs” of American greatness who are being cheated out of their inheritance in the present by “other” people who would deprive them of it.

This ideology is adamant that not only is America in a state of crisis currently, but there are certain kinds of people who are responsible for the idealized community’s deprivation. Although there can and should be civil disagreement and debate on any democratic nation’s immigration policies, fear of ethnic demographic changes based on racial animus and replacement anxiety should have no berth in a Christian’s rationale. I think of the Christian nationalist participants at the “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville in August of 2017, and the motivation of their acrimonious hatred. Their

¹⁶⁷ Homolar and Löffmann, “Populism and the Affective Politics of Humiliation Narratives.”

vicious chants of “[You] will not replace us,” were based on perceived notions of victimhood, loss and entitlement. Christian nationalist rhetoric, whether it is coming from a charismatic speaker in a church pulpit or rage-filled rally participants carrying torches is an implacable tool that weaponizes dangerous national myths.

Historical Facts about America’s Founding

All authors and interview participants agree that an understanding of patriotism as love and loyalty to one’s country is a good thing. They also concur that a nation like America, built on ideas that uphold liberties, especially of speech and religion, can be paradigmatic for any civil society. Paul Miller’s idea that having affection for and loyalty to the place where the Lord has located us is a godly motivation for caring for that part of creation which has been entrusted to us. But patriotism is not the same thing as Christian nationalism in that it does not rely on erroneous and hypocritical versions of America’s past. True patriotism recognizes America as a privileged nation that has experienced many blessings but it is also able to acknowledge the country’s national flaws and work harmoniously with all citizens to correct them.

The historical truth about America’s founding is that it was established by men who, although God-fearers, by and large were not orthodox Christians. They were mostly Deists and Unitarians who were very heavily influenced by naturalist precepts of the Enlightenment. The key producers of the governing documents are to be commended that they did indeed believe that God had created the world. For even though the founding documents were not what could be called theistic, and certainly not Christian, the belief in a Creator provided religious support for their statements in the Declaration of Independence that all men were created equal and endowed by their Creator with certain

unalienable rights, even though it ironically took a hundred years and several constitutional amendments to bring that reality to bear in America.

There are, in addition, other statements referencing God in the Declaration of Independence, albeit in vague generalities and with language borrowed from the Enlightenment, e.g. the term “Nature’s God.” The founders believed comprehensively that God had created a natural order of things providing a shared reality observable by all humanity. In their view, these observations would lead men to reasonable conclusions about what was most beneficial for society at large. Although it is historically inaccurate to think that the document was undergirded by explicitly orthodox Christian thinking, it was definitely framed with a view to human flourishing and the general welfare of all citizens of the nation. Human beings’ ability to live together in a healthy pluralism would be contingent on mankind’s sharing of ideas based on what could be ascertained from the natural order of things given by “nature’s God.”

The founders chose unequivocally to make no religion a basis for the new republic’s policies. Their great hope was that America would be a fountain of blessings of the promised liberty and freedom for all Americans, no matter their faith. Although in general these men were positive toward religion and believed in Christianity as a moral system informed by a providential God, for most of them that did not extend to faith in the historic Christian tenets of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The founders were sincere moralists and their genuine hope was that a morality akin to that of Christianity would be a catalyst for the conduct of the nation at large, even though by the time of the establishment of the nation, the high Christian ideals of the early Puritan settlers had tragically greatly abated.

As discussed above, a false view of history attributes many axioms of the founding documents to the Bible that actually have nothing to do with the Bible. It bears repeating that believing these types of errors leads to an inability of Christians to distinguish between what is truly the biblical, authoritative word of God regarding morality and what is just cultural heritage. This biblical illiteracy is a disheartening aspect of the diminishing spiritual formation in Christians that the interview participants rue.

A thesis that was among the most thought-provoking I examined was in Robert McKenzie's riveting book on the framers' perception of human nature. Although the historical records are very ambiguous regarding the founders' beliefs about God, that does not apply to their assessment of humanity. They constructed the documents that would govern the new nation in full awareness that the American populace by the eighteenth century was desperately in need of virtue. Although the language of the writings outlined certain rights for the citizens, "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness," the authors had robust doubts about whether the Republic could be sustained by a humanity uninformed by a cohesive, objective moral matrix. As MacIntyre writing 40 years ago and Haidt writing today have posited, the intuitive preferences of men will always dominate over sound moral reasoning. The danger of Christian nationalism is that it attempts to uphold the principles of a past "American morality" which never existed. It ascribes a transcendence and innate righteousness to a country which the founders knew instinctively it did not have and which in fact no country has ever had.

In the chaotic national polarization that now also characterizes parts of the American church, the pastors interviewed lament that Christians, who should be the first to make decisions informed by scripture and exhibiting the ethical principles of duty,

character, godly goals and discernment of God's word are demonstrating such a lack of concern for biblical ethics. It has been disconcerting for Christian leaders to recognize that many of their congregants truly believe that God has aligned his purposes with one particular nation as long as it is governed by the right people passing the right legislation. Followers of Christ are to have a clear understanding that not since ancient Israel has a nation been the particular agent of God's saving activity in history. This mythical and romanticized perspective of America's redemptive agency and even her morality has cordoned off from scrutiny the truth about the paradoxical nature of America's past and made those former times an idol in the minds of many Christians.

God has made clear throughout the Bible that he hates religion that is not truly of him even more than he hates the absence of religion. Based on everything we have read and heard regarding the identity markers of this movement, we can conclude that the fraudulent and beguiling trappings of Christian nationalism are condemnable by God.

Warrior Leader

As stated above, over the last decade Christians began to demonstrate a complete disregard for the biblical criteria for responsible, healthy leaders. Much has been written regarding the rugged masculinity and aggressive nature of the man Christians perceive as the ideal person to advance their agenda. As their religious views are shaped more and more by their political agenda, many shifts have occurred. The most stunning reversal has been seen in Christians who once overwhelmingly objected to the immorality of politicians, now dismissing it as completely immaterial. After the impeachment of Bill Clinton, 60 percent of Evangelicals adjudicated, "Immoral acts in private mean that a

public official could not be trusted to behave ethically in a professional capacity,”¹⁶⁸ according to the research cited above by David Campbell. During the 2016 Presidential campaign, after the release of the now infamous “Access Hollywood” tapes, the number of evangelicals who agreed with that statement plummeted to 20 percent, a dizzying 40 percent drop. According to Campbell’s research, two years into the Trump presidency it dropped even further. “White evangelicals were slightly less likely to see a connection between private immorality and publically unethical behavior: 16.5 percent compared with 20 percent back in 2016.”¹⁶⁹ The defense offered by many Christian leaders in 2016 was that the church needs a warrior, not a pastor. The church, it was argued, needs a warrior like King David to fight for Christian causes. If the candidate has been “arranged by God,” to accomplish the Christian goals, many Christians can justify any malfeasance on the part of their candidate.

The Goal of These Leaders

The rise of nationalist “strong-men” has been fostered by those same desires to return to a mythical glorious past and the perception that only a divisive, pugilistic type will be able to accomplish that goal. The idea undergirding these candidate choices is that only an authoritarian type is a match for the ruthless enemies of God. Since Christian nationalists perceive America to be under constant attack by secularists, the political candidate must be a militant character who will be willing to vilify the enemies in every

¹⁶⁸ Campbell, “The Perils of Politicized Religion.”

¹⁶⁹ Campbell.

domestic culture war and characterize most foreigners as swindlers of Americans and their way of life.

The Rhetoric of These Leaders

The rhetoric of the politician who paints a portrait of American carnage, a country in crisis, posturing himself as the only one who can fix it creates a strong bond with Christian nationalist thinkers. The combatant language erects an antagonistic tension between “the good people” and “the bad people,” that constantly reminds the former that the “bad people” do not just disagree with them; they are evil and want to destroy them. There is an emphasis on loss and unfairness that panders to the “nostalgia effect,” so imbedded in the psyche of this movement.

Religion and partisan politics have become so intertwined in this ideology that politicians sometimes spread their rhetoric inside the church itself. It is not uncommon for them to appear with Christian leaders to prove their religiosity by articulating their well-rehearsed if often uninformed “God-talk.” It is becoming more accepted for evangelical pastors to provide a platform for political lobbying from the pulpit. One of the interview participants, in discussing the practice of “patriotic” or “God and country” churches to invite politicians to take over the podium, spoke with me about a church that had hosted a prominent politician on the Fourth of July. The pastor of that large church had yielded the pulpit to the politician in the worship service for a quarter of an hour. When asked a follow-up question regarding the propriety of a politician’s campaign rhetoric in the sanctuary the participant replied, with characteristic humor, “That church would attempt a fly-over of the Blue Angels in the sanctuary if they thought they could make room for it.” The mental visual of that would be amusing if it were not for the sad

truth, as Campbell reminded us, that the Church loses its prophetic voice when it fuses itself with partisan politics. The desperate need of the hour is biblical, prescient voices in our culture, not those of partisan politicians in our pulpits.

The Backlash Against These Leaders

One of the interview participants spoke at length about the students he had encountered while teaching a class at a major mid-western university. Because he had earned their trust on matters of political interest, they were transparent with him regarding their religious perspectives. For most, he was the first evangelical they had ever met. His findings were consistent with David Campbell and others who say that a significant amount of secularization is being driven not by the secular culture, but by evangelicalism itself. Young people leaving the church or not coming into the church are not, for the most part, rebels who do not want anything to do with their parents' religion. They do not have antipathy for the supernatural nor do they despise rigorous discipleship. Rather, credible, compelling data from numerous researchers reveal it is Christian nationalism itself, the politicization of Christianity, and especially the hate-filled rhetoric and cultural grievances that are driving young people and others away from the church. Their departure is a backlash against the merging, the conflation of faith and partisan politics they are witnessing in the American church in this cultural moment. America is indeed becoming a more secularized country and some of that is very much attributable to the employment of Christianity for political theatre.

The Biblical Perspective

It bears repeating that the entire narrative of the Bible censures anything that would subvert the identity of the people of God and their distinct calling, including whom they choose for their leaders. As stated above, throughout the ages, it has always been biblically true that a *healthy* community of the people of God will afford honor to whom honor is due. There is no lack of scriptural criteria by which to assess that truth.

Once again, I was greatly impacted by the insights of Robert McKenzie and his wisdom from *We the Fallen People*, cited above. In rebuttal of the “arrangement by God” to bring a political leader to guide Christians out of the morass of secularism, obtain the proper judicial appointments, and eliminate enemies, he steps in concurring with Jesus to say, “It shall not be so with you.” According to McKenzie, the biblical response is just not as simple as “the church needs a fighter for her causes.” He reminds Christians that every political transaction in which they engage comes with a host of testimony to the watching world about whom we believe God to be. Because this is true, we must always be asking ourselves what the vote or the rally or the bumper sticker or the yard sign or even our anger toward those with whom we disagree is saying about what it means to follow Jesus. What does it proclaim about the nature of the gospel? Are we just putting forth Christ and his church as “one more political interest group?” I return to chapter two to reiterate what McKenzie opined about the audaciousness of a politician who would proclaim to the nation and in particular the evangelical church that bestowed on him eighty percent of its votes, that he alone could fix everything that was broken: “To say

these words and believe them is the height of hubris. To hear these words and believe them is the epitome of idolatry. They should evoke horror – not applause.”¹⁷⁰

One of the pastors with whom I spoke said he felt that after the past few years the church had pulled back the curtain like the little dog Toto in the Wizard of Oz to inadvertently expose a fraud. He said the exposure “revealed that Christians were emaciated, skeletal and spiritually un-formed” or they would have never taken some of the paths they have chosen.

Correlation Between Information Illiteracy and Christian Nationalism

As mentioned in the section on the historicity of America’s founding, Christian nationalism creates dangerous illusions by crediting America’s past “morality” or values to the authority of the word of God. In chapter two we looked at the ways in which scripture calls Christians to live in wisdom and challenge anything that is inconsistent with the teaching of scripture. Donald Guthrie commented on the ways in which so much intellectual wrangling takes place in an effort to make sense of all the circulating myths. Guthrie reminded us that Paul told Timothy this struggle can eventually rob the mind of truth. The interview participants each contributed examples of ways in which they observed a lack of biblical literacy in their congregants which they felt had subsequently led to ill-mannered conduct toward each other and those outside the church. Without a strong biblical foundation informing their thinking, Christians have capitulated to much of the disinformation that is keeping them from acting in wisdom.

¹⁷⁰ McKenzie, *We the Fallen People*, 273-274.

The Power of Conspiracy Theories

To the surprise and disappointment of the interview participants as well as many of the researchers, Christians are attracted to and impacted by conspiracy theories in disproportionate numbers. Some research indicates the reason that is true is the way in which conspiracy theories, particularly the significantly influential QAnon, present as a force for good, designed to equip adherents to fight “evil.” Equally attractive to Christians is the effusive apocalyptic language, orchestrated to give adherents the confidence that they will be the first to know when “the end” is coming. Once again, there is the appeal to the feeling of superiority that is characteristic of Christian nationalism.

Several pastors noted their distress over the 24/7 internet disinformation their congregants consumed, the effects of which were impossible to disentangle in a thirty-minute sermon on Sunday morning. Several have experienced “feeling like a failure” after seeing congregants’ posts on Facebook or some other social medium as they spread the disinformation they are ingesting that bears no semblance of reality. The fragmentation being caused in churches, communities, and even families is widening as conspiracy theories grow in popularity and become the justification for ever-increasing irrational behavior.

Crisis Rhetoric

As mentioned above, one of the consistent themes undergirding the Christian nationalism narrative is crisis rhetoric. The seductive ways in which initiators of conspiracy theories inculcate insecurity and anxiety into the public is masterful. The narratives of the conspiracy often begin with questions like “Isn’t it interesting that

nobody has ever heard of x, y or z? or Has anybody wondered why – fill in the blank.

The click-bait questions exacerbate the fear that the world is chaotic and no institution can be trusted, only the instigator of the theory.

Disintegration of Critical Thinking

Because, as discussed above, our current technological age has made it possible for the internet to become a primary source of the dissemination of anti-intellectualism, it is becoming more and more obvious to these pastors and researchers that Christians are mindlessly capitulating to bizarre and false messaging rather than critically and biblically evaluating incoming information. When a lie or conspiracy theory on the internet contradicts what Christians know as truth, they have a moral responsibility to actively “declutter” the internet with denial of the disinformation. Instead, one of the most dangerous aspects of conspiracy theories is that Christians who consume most of them consider themselves very well-informed. They will warn a pastor with whom they are disagreeing, “I have done my research,” or “I have read and read and read on this topic,” meaning “I am an expert on this and you are not.” They sincerely believe that their hysteria over each outrageous claim is well-founded and that the pastor is either ill-informed or a coward for not apprising the congregation of the dangers with which this congregant is acquainting him.

The interview participants explained that they were “genuinely stunned” that so many of their people had been deluded into thinking they were upholding biblical principles when they parroted what they were absorbing from completely implausible conspiracy theories. The overriding sentiment was surprise that, even given the blinding

nature of sin, believers have been so easily “seduced by such obviously un-Christian thinking and conduct,” even to the point of “condoning or at least excusing violence.”

The Animus of the Online Influences

Social scientist Jonathan Haidt, speaks instructionally about the ways in which people bind themselves into groups with a powerful allegiance. He ends his book *The Righteous Mind*, asking “Can’t We All Disagree More Constructively?” The extreme right Christian nationalists who have wielded such influence in the Church would answer a resounding no to that question. They thrive on disagreement and despise magnanimity. The way in which Christian nationalism binds its adherents is to form strong coalitions for the very purpose of not only disagreeing with but soundly defeating common enemies. Research has shown they consider themselves to have a mandate to extinguish all opposition, not make peace with it. It is a warrior-like, revolutionary attitude pervasive in the movement that is the antithesis of the peaceable life to which Christ calls his followers. As Iyengar and Westwood reported, the in-group does not simply feel animus toward those who disagree with them politically; they want to act on it.

The Strength of the In-Group vs. Out-Group

The “us vs. them” mentality of this movement is designed to create a mind-set that says “we would be better off without them.” In chapter two we discussed this group grievance from C.S. Lewis’ “Inner Ring,” to Cass Sunstein’s “Law of Group Polarization,” to David French’s “enabling and activating lies.” As the most extreme and vocal of the group raise the stakes, the group becomes more dangerous and the moral limitations on the rage begins to abrade.

The faulty political and theological underpinnings of this movement have exaggerated the “perfidy of opponents” to the extent that they are no longer seen as mere opponents; they are duplicitous traitors who need to be eliminated. The interview participants reported the difficulty of what they called “threading the needle,” each week as they attempt to preach the gospel while encountering visible opposition in the body language of those who are now grievance-filled people.

Several pastors expressed a desire that more of their congregants would understand the intensity level of the in-group-induced sense of defiance directed at them each week. Justin conveyed sadly that people who had once respected and trusted the “shepherds God had placed over them,” were now completely “unquestioning of their in-group and suspicious of their shepherd.” To say that this is a heart-breaking development for a pastor is a monumental understatement.

The Weaponization of Language

Recent studies have shown that the rage permeating the movement of Christian nationalism in this political moment can be amplified by certain words that penetrate the national conversation by way of skilled politicians, media, and social media operatives. The words and phrases can interject new fears and anxieties or simply amplify those already present. It is a form of psychological terrorism and moral bullying aimed at creating complete ontological insecurity and the drawing of battle lines in the society. In chapter two I discussed the strategy used by Christopher Rufo, a conservative activist who is extremely adept at weaponizing words and slogans to generate fear and loathing in the public. It is difficult to identify any one cultural influencer who is currently more proficient at promoting this language, with the possible exception of Fox News’ Tucker

Carlson. The words and terms employed are all powerful tools in the arsenal of these experts in fear-mongering and crisis rhetoric that pit Christians against one another and against the world they are called to bless by being peace-makers, not purveyors of grievance.

Christian Nationalism's Lack of Understanding of Pluralism

Christian nationalism is an ideology followed mostly by white Americans, and as so it tends to intensify racial and ethnic schisms. The entire movement has exhibited an inability and lack of desire to coexist amicably with other cultures. For all its adherents' claims of an understanding of the history of America and the founding fathers' intentions, there is actually a lack of knowledge of the founders' full expectations, a dynamic, productive society which although dominated by white western Europeans at its inception, would inevitably become more pluralistic. So many Christians fear that if they demonstrate a tolerance for other religions and cultures they, and by extension America, will become unmoored from the principles of the founding and the "American way of life." Research showed in chapter two that this was the number one driver behind the Capitol rioters' conduct on January 6. Adhering to the "Great Replacement" theory, nationalists have convinced themselves that minorities are progressively replacing white populations because of immigration policies held by liberal partisan politics and low birth rates among white Americans. They are "taking our jobs, our housing" and they pose a "risk to us and our way of life."

But Christianity is a religion focused on the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ who has always been in the process of gathering a people "from every nation,

tribe, people and tongue.” Several of the interview participants expressed concern that Christians have lost sight of that trans-national nature of the kingdom of God that would welcome the sojourner. The pastors were extremely concerned about the self-centeredness among congregants and the desire to protect the status quo at all costs. There is little concern for leveraging political power on behalf of the disenfranchised, but tremendous emphasis on economic self-interest. Whatever Christian discipleship means to many American Christians today, it definitely does not mean that a comfortable existence full of personal pursuits and affluence should be disrupted. This is, again, antithetical to the biblical truth that Christ’s lordship will always prove disruptive to idolatrous lifestyles and norms.

For the past decade, American right and left have developed a deep sense of grievance and misunderstanding of each other and of themselves. As we saw through all the literature and interview participants’ contributions, Americans on neither side have acute self-awareness of the part they are playing in this division. As they entrench themselves further into their polarization, increasingly they endow cultural and political matters with infinite, transcendent value. This propensity to assign transcendence makes civil discourse extremely difficult because it is so challenging to engage with someone “who equates compromise with apostasy.” According to several authors surveyed, there are a disproportionate number of evangelicals today who will choose their cultural and partisan ideologies over biblical theology and unfortunately believe they are choosing faith. Because of the contentious atmosphere effected by those who only want to discuss polarizing topics, there are a disproportionate number of people in congregations who do not really know where to turn to engage in meaningful conversation. Several interview

participants said they know there is a large majority in the church that is disgusted with the polarization and anger but they are unfortunately a “silent” majority.

Again, the essence of America is that she is a multi-faith, multi-ethnic democratic republic on an enormous continent. If Christian nationalism does not stop its relentless march, including into the churches, the consensus of the literature is that this nation and the church will not adapt and the American church will ultimately lose all credibility. In an ironic twist, true followers of Christ will lose what little influence they have in the public square as more and more far-right culture warriors – who are actually indifferent to true Christianity – accomplish their own unrestrained, unbiblical goals.

The interview participants, however, are much more hopeful. As one said, “I believe with all my heart this movement is going to implode and just cave in on itself.” Another said, “I think ultimately it will be shown for the hollow, bankrupt shell that it is.” As one author said there is a way that the body of Christ can be the bell-weather for living together in principled pluralism in America, demonstrating to the world that differences do not mean giving up deeply held beliefs when love of neighbor is present. Whether the world or the government in power agrees with us on any cultural matter, they must see us truly loving people, standing for justice in the public square and holding our own selves accountable to what we profess to believe. They need to see that the word Christian is not just a brand or a modifier for any identity we think we need in order to “win.” They need to be shown that for the Christian, “winning” means having the privilege of living every minute of life “Coram Deo,” honoring God and blessing his world by transcribing the character of Christ in the culture. This includes living and dialoguing in healthy, non-adversarial ways in contexts that are at times filled with hate

and accusations. On the extreme left of our political divides, Christianity is often treated as contemptible; but on the extreme right, it is a weapon to be used for political ends. We must defend the ways and character of the Lord Jesus Christ that are neither of those things. We must show the world that the imitation of his sacrificial love of neighbor and the exhibition of the fruit of his Spirit is the only life that produces genuine human flourishing.

Americans must find a way forward to live in our country in humility, patience, and love of neighbor, just as the founders who brought the nation into being intended. For American *Christians*, that means living peaceably and loving our neighbors in a pluralistic society just as the one who brought the world into being intended.

Recommendations for Practice

In as much as the findings of this study have revealed not just characteristics of Christian nationalism but the realities of its consequences, we conclude there is a need for pastors to have a heightened awareness that the issues are not just cultural headwinds beating at the door of the church. In many cases, they have already entered via congregants who are entangled in this dangerous ideology and might not even have an awareness of its dangers or a consciousness of their involvement. If Christian leaders are going to halt the trajectory and reverse the course of this movement, they must begin by helping people to understand what it is they believe and how those beliefs are determinative for identity creation and the conduct that springs from that identity.

Correcting Faulty Historicity

Although no pastor can be expected to intertwine a history lesson with his sermon each week, there are ways they can begin to reshape the particular concept of American history that is exerting such inordinate influence over Christians' perspectives of patriotism and national fealty. Since the research demonstrated that the proliferation of the idea of a Christian America is one of the key drivers of the movement, it would appear to be a necessary correction.

As stated above, there are many reasons these false views of American history are such a destructive error for the church. They make the humanistic ideas of the founders tantamount to the word of God. To say this does a disservice to the scriptures is vastly understated. It bears repeating that this distortion of the revelation of scripture discourages Christians from the critical thinking necessary for a biblically informed analysis of civic matters that is independent of American cultural values at any time in her history. Christians' political and civic decisions must be informed by biblical principles that are not captive to the patriotic and cultural spirit of the age.

The Bible is the bulwark that protects God's people from alternative narratives that intrude into their hearts and minds and it is critical that Christians recognize the extent to which many contemporary stories clash with the biblical story. Christians must ask themselves, "How is the American founding myth influencing my view of the gospel and God's relationship with my particular nation? If I believe that I am first a citizen of God's kingdom and my primary identity is in Christ, how might I be living as if civil government and power are more important? Am I demonstrating my fidelity to the Lord Jesus above my loyalty to any other person or entity? If I am a person who has political

responsibilities as part of my being in the world, how am I undertaking those in humility?”

Because these kinds of questions are best asked in community in dialogical settings, community groups or small groups could be assembled to conduct a book study, making use of one of the exceptional books on America’s founding and history. Many respected, credentialed Christian historians have written engaging and informative books on this topic in an effort to bring clarity to this issue for the church. Men like Mark Noll, John Fea, Thomas Kidd, Robert McKenzie, George Marsden and many others listed in the bibliography are excellent resources.

One non-pastor who was interviewed for the research spoke about participating in these kinds of study groups in his church. He reported that his pastor would be present in a different group each week to answer questions that had arisen previously and steer the conversation on controversial matters in a way that modeled love and charity. Because the national conversation around these issues is usually driven by the extreme fringes on the internet, it is easy to forget that most people are not political hobbyists and many do not participate in online communities. Instead, they are the “exhausted two-thirds” in the middle who are emotionally drained by the rancor. These are the church members who, as one pastor said, do not even know where to go to have a meaningful conversation and would welcome a chance to sit in discussion with other believers and learn together how to think about an issue that has an extraordinary impact on the church in America today.

Illuminating Truth about Online Information

Two of the interview participants expressed how much success they had bringing in respected “influencers” to speak on Wednesday nights or for short weekend conferences regarding pressing cultural concerns. As mentioned above, the outsiders are voices who serve as lightning rods to conduct heat away from the pastor and introduce words or concepts the pastor might not feel comfortable using. There are many veteran pastors and Christian public speakers who have training in all the distinctions and subtleties of the effects and dangers of social media and particularly conspiracy theories. They can enter the conversations of a church and speak to socio-political issues like these from a biblical perspective, equipped with the appropriate training and skill.

One participant engaged a guest speaker who spoke about online conversations and conspiracy theories in the context of image-bearing. His emphasis was on language as a God-given gift to image-bearers, intended to be a beautiful reflection of the Lord. He discussed the ways in which even though social media weaponizes words to confuse and polarize, disagreements between two image bearers should be founded on human dignity. He emphasized practical yet loving ways to deal with family members and friends by sharing stories to find out what they are feeling, fearing, or hoping for to discover the reasons for their participation in activities like online conspiracies.

He reported being impacted by listening to one of the Capitol rioters who said upon pleading guilty, “I am so ashamed and embarrassed.” He said it humbled him and reminded him that Christians should be the first to say to the confused, not “Why in the world do you believe that?” but “Help me understand what your hopes and fears are.” Christians must ask themselves, “Are we really interested in learning that about the

people with whom we disagree?” That kind of interaction is an integral part of the spiritual formation of the Christian and will be a blessing to those with whom we engage in loving discourse.

He posited safe ways to dialogue with those who vehemently disagree and offered questions that all Christians should ask themselves, “Am I speaking with care and listening with empathy, whether online or in-person? Am I being respectful of the person with very different views? Am I demonstrating how Christians function in society with civility? Is there an opportunity here for me to untangle a myth or some form of disinformation? How can I honor God with my dialogue in this atmosphere of intolerance?”

Alan Jacobs adds some helpful advice:

1. Value learning over debating. Don't “talk for victory.”
2. As best you can, online and off, avoid people who fan flames.
3. Remember you don't have to respond to what everyone else is responding to in order to signal your virtue and right-mindedness.
4. Gravitate as best you can and in every way you can toward people who seem to value genuine community and can handle disagreement with equanimity.
5. Seek out the best and fairest-minded of people whose views you disagree with. Listen to them for a time without responding. Whatever they say, *think it over*.
6. Patiently and as honestly as you can, assess your “repugnances.”
7. Beware the power of myth.

8. Try to describe others' positions in the language that they use, without indulging in "in other words" ...¹⁷¹

The posture of defensiveness that so many Christians would prefer to take is simply insufficient for this cultural moment.

Educating Congregants Regarding Pluralism

This study concluded that there are several necessary components to addressing the issues, reflection on the past (understanding the historicity of the church as well as the nation), relationship in the present (learning how to engage with fellow image bearers both online and off with civility and respect, informed by biblical truth), and finally, responsible action in the future (having a commitment to begin modeling and upholding a healthy pluralism.) There is no room in the ideology of Christian nationalism for the reality that America is a culturally and religiously pluralistic nation. When genuine Christ-followers are placed in positions of leadership, they are to lead with the compassion of Christ for all members of the society.

In chapter two, Alan Jacobs introduced us to a type of debate performed at Yale in which the objective is to win someone over to one of your deeply held convictions. The corollary is that you are then won over by the humble persuasion of your opponent. The term describing this unique debate process was to "break on the floor." Jacobs taught that the expression demonstrated a willingness to defer to the other person enough to be able to participate peaceably in community with him. For American Christians, "breaking on

¹⁷¹ Alan Jacobs, *How to Think: A Survival Guide for a World at Odds*, (New York: Currency, 2017), 155-156.

the floor” would mean actually appreciating other Americans who do not look like them, think like them, nor have the same customs as them. It would mean that Christians have begun to see other human beings who disagree with them not as evil and certainly not as people who are attempting to destroy the world as we know it.

In one of the most theologically impactful conversations in which I engaged, interview participant Martin spoke instructively about biblical anthropology and how it should effect the Christian’s engagement of fellow image bearers:

As pastors, we need to teach our people that Christians must learn to adhere to a very complicated anthropology. We must maintain a very complicated biblical picture of secular human beings as created in the image of God, with conscience written on their hearts, *and* at the same time people who are suppressing the truth in unrighteousness. Because that is such a very complex and difficult thing to understand and convey, we instead present this alternate picture of a conspiracy of Darwinists who are seeking to take something that is self-evidently stupid and obviously evil, and plot against us to harm us. So, when we have teens who go off to college and they encounter and befriend secularists, they say to us, “Well you know mom and dad, actually they are not stupid and they are not evil in the sense of self-consciously evil and I really like them and want to bring them home for Thanksgiving.” Now why in the world can’t we give our children the nuance of saying “You know you are going to meet some people who are materialists and atheists but who actually do love each other and who think they are doing the right thing, believe themselves to be doing the right thing.” That sounds like you are denying the sin when what you are doing is affirming that it’s there. Because the Bible says “There is a way that *seems* right to a man but in the end, it leads to death.” But because biblical anthropology is just so complicated, we tell them instead that there are specifically evil people who are *wanting* to go the way of death. That is just not the biblical picture. That is just not consistent with the New Testament. Those are two very different messages.

There is no way to overstate the importance of the message that our neighbors are not personified evil; they are fellow image bearers of God. Practicing this kind of thinking would incorporate gathering with people from other communal, religious, and cultural backgrounds, to share and listen to people’s autobiographies. It would involve asking

questions like, “What were formative experiences that shaped how you feel about politics? What were the influences of your family and your community that led you to this particular ideology? What *are* your fears and concerns about government, religion, a pluralistic culture?”

Each of the interview participants agreed that there is a need for pastors to teach their people that in a society like America, there are people from many different faith, political, geographical and cultural backgrounds. And the great privilege and responsibility of Christian citizens of this country is to promote healthy pluralism by seeking to love their neighbors, pursue justice in the public square, promote religious liberty for all faiths, foster racial justice, protect the rule of law, honor constitutional processes, and carry out all of these responsibilities, doing Christ’s work in Christ’s ways.

The Need for Curricula

Christian ministry leaders, with the help of Christian politicians and other experts skilled in matters of public service and utilizing the vast research results available, would be prudent in this highly polarized and politicized environment to develop curricula on “political discipleship” for congregants. One component of a curriculum of this nature would be helping church members understand why it is so important for pastors to promote the de-politicizing of Christianity by identifying and refusing to give platforms to politicians who exploit the church for their own gain. It would biblically explain the importance of pastors and religious leaders declining to allow politicians to use or profit from them or their places of worship for anything promoting partisanship that polarizes

congregations. A thoughtful and well-written curriculum would educate lay leaders on the appropriate ways to speak out against intertwining the church with politics and how to kindly express a negative reaction to politicians who deploy religion and weaponize faith to gain votes.

It should, of course, begin with a biblical framework that teaches Christians all the ways that the meaningful identity and idealized community they seek already exists for them. It would include instruction on the many ways in which they can serve the mission of God faithfully in the public square as agents of transformation. There should be an effort to re-catechize the people of God, restoring and strengthening a thick Christian identity, formed within the community of the church, existing for the same goal it has always had, to make Jesus known, extending his kingdom and blessing his world in all the ways that only Christians as agents of blessing can do.

Embedded in these potential solutions, there must be a radical re-insertion of teaching on ecclesiology and the Christian's identity as a member and participator in the visible ideal, alternative society living amid the culture for the sake of the flourishing of the world. All the research demonstrates that the need of the hour in the church is for that "super-identity" to be re-established that supplants any other identity that the culture or partisan politics can provide. For Christians' identities to be thick enough to be impenetrable by the cultural and political threats that would puncture them, the people of God must consistently and intentionally be relegating all secondary identities to their proper place. In this current moment of sociological sea change, many Christians are quick to passionately criticize those on the left who claim the personal right to create their own identity while failing to recognize the extent to which they have sought an

identity rooted in an idolatrous relationship with partisan ideology. The Lord Jesus, during his time on earth, was always instructing his disciples that it was not enough to correctly identify the deficiencies of others while ignoring their own. There is a need for Christians and their leaders to recognize that the conflation of nationalistic politics with Christian faith is one of the greatest threats to Christian identity, the Church's prophetic voice, and its ability to bless the world.

Although it must begin with them, none of these solutions are solely the responsibility of Christian leaders; both leaders and congregants have obligations in this perilous moment for the American church. This nation, in whom so many Christians are attempting to put their hope, will fail, as it always has, in innumerable ways to live up to the core principles of its founding and Christians' vain aspirations for it. The church of Jesus Christ never will. God *will* have his distinctive people living together in a finally and fully perfected community. That is his never-repealed original intention and it will stand long after every empty contemporary human ideology has vanished. As we pray "*Your* kingdom come, *your* will be done," may we commit ourselves to the true knowledge of that will and our own willing obedience to take on the responsibility of carrying it out in his world.

Recommendations for Further Research

This study focused on the characteristics and effects of Christian nationalism in the church today and how pastors can strengthen a Christian identity in their congregants that will supersede that of Christian nationalism. As with any study, there are limitations as to how extensive the research can be. Therefore, pursuit of the following areas of study

could be highly valuable for the reader in gaining a better understanding of what the characteristics of Christian nationalism are as well as investigating the impact this phenomenon is having on the church and what Christian leaders can do about it. Four areas of investigation seem particularly relevant for further study:

1. A thorough examination of American history that avails Christians of a true appraisal of the past instead of the flawed approach that has fueled Christian nationalism.
2. A study of populism and the ways in which it is inextricably linked to the Christian nationalist narrative, especially as it pertains to the discourse of “us vs. them” promulgated on social media and by political operatives.
3. A study on how American individualism has contributed to a lack of respect for authority, including respect and trust for pastors. Included in this should be a study on how followers of Christ can care for pastors who have actually left the ministry because of the issues dealt with in this study.
4. An undertaking of an in-depth study of the biblical narrative’s focus on the primary identity of the people of God from Eden to Revelation.

Much of the literature reviewed agreed that American Christians do not really comprehend the history of the “American experiment” nor the practical goals the founders set out to achieve. If contemporary Christians were to carry out deeply objective research to understand the republic as the founders envisioned it, they would be able to evaluate the past with more clarity, and think more correctly about the current culture. Christian historians like John Fea, Mark Noll, Robert McKenzie, and Thomas Kidd are

credible authors and professors of history residing on the faculties of prominent, trustworthy Christian institutions and they have provided many resources.

In closing, I would say that this is one of the most clarifying and disturbing observations I experienced: most American Christians do not have an intuitive grasp of the unyielding grip and influence political rhetoric has had on their thinking and actions. Therefore, research might center on issues like the crisis-centric rhetoric used by populist strongmen to provide themselves an entry point for the reassurance narrative upon which their appeal is founded. A deep awareness of this rhetoric, in which the political agent instills anxiety and insecurity and then promises a provision of security that he alone possesses, would help Christians understand various linguistic mechanisms and how they have been used to manipulate the Christian electorate's thinking.

Several of the interview participants shared a focus on the disappointment they feel at the loss of their credibility and trustworthiness. This study did not focus on what congregants can do to restore the pastor/congregant relationship but it was evident that it requires and deserves attention. The decline in numbers of men entering the pastorate – I learned at the completion of this research that after years of declining enrollment, a respected and prominent evangelical seminary was selling its main campus – and the increase in those leaving or considering leaving merits research into how the church can better embrace pastors in these times of onslaughts of criticism that almost inevitably lead to burnout or despair. At the end of this study I found that was my highest priority and the recipient of my deepest prayers.

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