

“Sharing Our Stories, Reviewing  
our Loyalties, Finding Ways to  
Bridge the Divide.”

ESMC Elective Class - Christian Nationalism

Nov. 19, 2023

“The metamorphosis of Jesus Christ from a humble servant of the abject poor to a symbol that stands for gun rights, prosperity theology, anti-science, limited government (that neglects the destitute) and fierce nationalism is truly the strangest transformation in human history.”

- Tweet by Rainn Wilson (best known as Dwight Schrute from *The Office*)

# AMBS Course goals for: *“Resisting Christian Nationalism with the Gospel of Peace”*

1. To define White Christian Nationalism.
2. To develop a biblical understanding of political idolatry according to the Old and New Testaments.
3. To competently talk about why the life and teachings of Jesus are incompatible with the values of White Christian Nationalism.
4. To competently reflect on ways congregations and leaders can mobilize and challenge White Christian nationalism both inwardly and outwardly.
5. To reflect on Strategies of dialogue across extreme human difference, including knowing when it's not safe to engage in dialogue.
6. To contribute to classroom spaces for sharing wisdom and ways the church can interrupt patterns of sin and injustice in our world, including loyalties to state power that lead to political idolatry.

# What is Christian Nationalism?

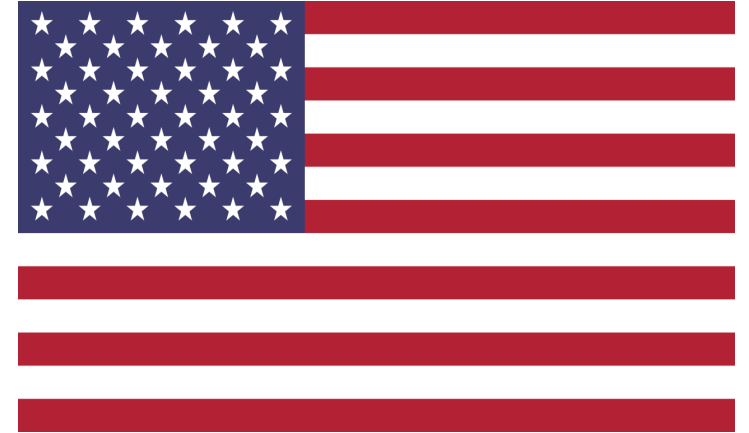
“Christian Nationalism seeks power and privilege for followers of one faith.”

“Christian Nationalism is a movement in which extremists advocate the use of violence if needed to push their beliefs and impose their will.”

“It’s a fusion of one’s faith with conservative Christian politics.”

“A cultural framework asserting that all civic life in the United States should be organized according to a particular form of conservative Christianity.” – Andrew Whitehead, *American Idolatry*

“that America is, and should remain, a Christian nation”



"An Appeal to Heaven" flag, a symbol embraced in recent years by Christian Nationalists, hangs outside Speaker Mike Johnson's congressional office.

*Eric McDaniel/NPR*



# Survey Questions Measuring American attitudes towards Christian Nationalism

*Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States* by Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry.

1. "The federal government should declare the United States a Christian nation."
2. "The federal government should advocate Christian values."
3. "The federal government should enforce strict separation of church and state."
4. "The federal government should allow the display of religious symbols in public spaces."
5. "The success of the United States is part of God's plan."
6. "The federal government should allow prayer in public schools."

*Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States* by Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry.

Four Responses to Christian Nationalism:

Rejectors (21.5%)	Resisters (26.6%)	Accommodators (32.1%)	Ambassadors (19.8%)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Most educated</li> <li>• Wealthier</li> <li>• Live in more urban centers of the Northeast &amp; West</li> <li>• 40% see themselves as religious</li> <li>• More likely to be atheist</li> <li>• Average age of 43</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Share many of the demographics of rejectors, but less educated</li> <li>• 80% believe in a higher power</li> <li>• Suspicious of America as a Christian Nation, but might be comfortable with religious symbols in public spaces</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lean toward Christian nationalism while holding some ambivalence toward it</li> <li>• More women than Rejectors or Resisters</li> <li>• Older than Rejectors or Resisters</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identification with political conservatism</li> <li>• Belief in the Bible as the literal word of God</li> <li>• <u>Less</u> religious practice</li> <li>• Founding fathers were Christian</li> <li>• Belief that America is on the brink of moral decay</li> <li>• Belief that God requires the faithful to wage war for good</li> <li>• Least educated of four groups</li> <li>• Oldest, avg. age of 54</li> <li>• Only 16% reside in cities</li> <li>• Belief in the rapture</li> </ul>



# Patriotic violence:

A full 23 percent of Americans believe that, “because things have gotten so far off track, true American patriots may have to resort to violence in order to save [their] country.” The recent poll conducted by the Public Religion Research Institute and the Brookings Institution found that one-third of white evangelical Protestants took this position.

- *Canadian Mennonite*, Nov. 3, 2023

# To be an evangelical (according to the National Association of Evangelicals) is to:

1. To uphold the Bible as one's ultimate authority,
2. To confess the centrality of Christ's atonement,
3. To believe in a born-again conversion experience, and
4. To actively work to spread this good news and reform society accordingly.

## Some takeaways from *Taking America Back for God*:

- Religious commitment, expressed as personal piety and commitment to a faith community, is not always a predictor for Christian nationalism.
- One does not have to go to church or hold to orthodox Christian beliefs to be a Christian nationalist.
- Christian nationalism should not be thought of as synonymous with “evangelicalism” or even “white evangelicalism.”
- Christian nationalism is also not reducible to racism. In other words, we cannot claim that Christian nationalism is “really just about racism when you get down to it.”
- When Christian nationalism zigs, religious practice zags [i.e., declines]. Christian nationalism matters, and we can expect to see its manifestations at different levels of government even though it is declining in size. Christian nationalism is not about religious revival but about power and privilege over society.

What view of the State? Are we as Mennonites still a people of two kingdoms with strict separation of church and state?

Nationalism exists in two major strains:

Ethnic – religious	and	Civic
Ethnic nationalists say the state belongs to or should be guided by one dominate ethnic group and its religion and language. Anyone else is suspect at worst, tolerated at best.		Civic nationalists affirm that governing institutions, not race or religion, form the basis of the state. They affirm that a commitment to overarching ideals – freedom, civil rights, equality before the law – makes a multiethnic democracy possible, even necessary.

- J. Robert Charles, *Anabaptist World*, Aug. 25, 2023

# A Christian Nation?

- Cesar Garcia, MWC general secretary, excerpts from *Canadian Mennonite*, Nov. 3, 2023.

“To ensure the existence of a voluntary church, there must be freedom and the possibility of saying ‘no’ to Christian faith, Christian values and Christian lifestyle. Without liberty and a guarantee of freely living out decisions about religion and ethics, there won’t be a real church.

In the words of historian William Estep: “The Anabaptists were not interested in constructing a church through coercion, either by infant baptism or by the power of the magistrate....They were concerned with gathering a church of believers who had freely responded to the proclamation of the gospel.”

This way of thinking rejects the idea of depending on human governments to promote the Christian Faith, its values or its way of living. Indeed, looking for ways of getting legal, religious privileges over other faiths is fundamentally incompatible with this perspective.”

## A complex web of ideologies and issues:

Evangelicals		Social Media		Racism
	American Exceptionalism		Patriarchy	
Power & Control		White Supremacy		Guns
	MAGA movement		Conspiracy theories	
Wokeism		Election Denial		Separation of Church & State
	Political Idolatry		Patriotism	
Rural vs Urban		Information Silos		Culture Wars
	Immigration		Militarism	

# The problem with Christian Nationalism:

- Christian Nationalism corrupts and betrays the Gospel through power, fear and violence.
- Christian Nationalism by asserting its own interpretation of Christianity, undermines the democratic ideals of equality and religious freedom for all.
- Christian Nationalism sets up a 'Us vs. Them' polarization that leads to fear, low tolerance, disregard, hate, and violence towards the 'Other'.
- Christian Nationalism is fracturing relationships and the Church.
- Christian Nationalism is not primarily about mobilizing the faithful toward religious ends, but instead an attempt to retain or gain power in the public sphere – whether political, social or religious.
- Christian Nationalism is ultimately about privilege.

# Some questions:

1. How big of a problem is Christian Nationalism? If so, how did we get here? How about here in Canada?
2. Do you have your own stories of relationships which have been negatively impacted by current religious and political attitudes and actions? What feelings would you attach to this? For example: sadness, frustration, fear, bewilderment?
3. What role does race play in Christian Nationalism?
4. Are there aspects of Christian Nationalism you would support?
5. Should our faith be tied in any way to the righteousness of a nation?



## More questions:

6. What is a faithful role for us as believers in the way of peace, but also as citizens in our community?
7. Is there a difference between being patriotic and nationalistic?
8. As a religious minority, how might being Mennonite inform our views on the issue of Christian Nationalism?
9. What role does race play in Christian Nationalism? Should we always use the term White Christian Nationalism?
10. How does Christian Nationalism intersect with The Doctrine of Discovery and attempts at Truth and Reconciliation?
11. What are your sources for religious, political and cultural news? Do you tend to stay in your own information silo?
12. Do you engage in or avoid debate on social media?

# Possible questions for next week:

1. Is it possible to speak across the divide? Have you found ways to maintain relationships despite such polarization?
2. Is it possible to have a non-anxious, non-fearful posture on this topic and yet still engage? If so, how?
3. How can we share our wisdom and possibly mobilize on the ways the church can interrupt patterns of sin and injustice in our world, including loyalties to state power that lead to political idolatry?

## Some Resources

- Barber, James. "White Christian Nationalism." *Canadian Mennonite*, Vol. 27 Issue 21, (October 20, 2023): pp. 22-23.
- Charles, J. Robert. "For the Common Good: Not all nationalism is bad. An inclusive nation builds on unifying ideals, not race or religion." *Anabaptist World*, Vol. 4 No. 11, (August 25, 2023): pp. 14-15.
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- Du Mez, Kristen Kobes. *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation*. New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2021.
- Gorski, Philip S. and Samuel L. Perry. *The Flag and the Cross: White Christian Nationalism and the Threat to American Democracy*. New York: Oxford University Press. 2022
- Schrag, Paul. "Unholy alliance: How shall Anabaptists push back against the rise of Christian nationalism?", *Anabaptist World*, Vol. 4 No. 11, (August 25, 2023): p. 7.
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- Whitehead, Andrew L. and Samuel L. Perry. *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States*. New York: Oxford University Press. 2022
- Wilkerson, Isabel. *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*. New York: Random House, 2023.