Approaching Christian nationalism

ADVANCE

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Introduction

How should pastors respond to Christian nationalism (CN)? This is a difficult question for two reasons. First, the term 'Christian nationalism' is not clearly defined and has a wide spectrum of applications, even within the US. Second, despite having no consistent definition, CN has rapidly become a lightning rod of attention in news, media, and evangelical circles. The volume is up, but the clarity is down.

The goal of this paper is twofold. First, I survey several theories of CN currently in use: three negative criticisms and three positive defenses. As we will see, what one side condemns is not exactly what the other embraces. Second, I identify three critical issues that are being conflated (or ignored) within the CN rhetoric: the undefined political theology that characterizes much of current evangelical thought, the rise of political disengagement, and the influence of theological positions regarding eschatology and the Kingdom of God. Under the auspices of 'responding to CN', pastors are liable to make some significant missteps if these issues are not first recognized and faced on their own merits. Having clarified them, leaders will be in a better position to wrestle with the various strands of CN.

Note: this paper addresses Christian nationalism in America and from an American perspective. I cannot speak to the applicability of these insights to the rest of the world.

Theories of Christian nationalism

CN, as a term, can be traced back to at least the Christian Nationalist Party of the 1940s. However, it reflects an ideology that runs back further, perhaps to the Spanish-American war.[1] According to Matthew McCollough, it was in that war that "messianic interventionism," what he sees as a key ingredient to the development of CN and something beyond even the Manifest Destiny of the 19th century, was first embraced as "both Christian duty and providential destiny".[2]

The contemporary usage of CN terminology, however, has developed especially within the last ten years. Below I provide a brief survey of several definitions of CN, with the intention of demonstrating just how wide a spectrum exists within the semantic domain of the term. I have categorized each presentation of CN as either 'Negative' (critical of CN) or 'Positive' (defensive of CN), and provided my own analysis of each.

NEGATIVE THEORIES

Perry and Whitehead write in their book *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States:* "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".[3] They understand it as the syncretism of religion with political conservatism, nativism, white supremacy, patriarchy, and the divine sanction of military action. The result is a framework "that blurs distinctions between Christian identity and American identity".[4] Three arguments are key to their thesis:

1. The polarization of American discourse is largely a result of CN. (For example, CN—and not 'conservative Christianity'—explains the large numbers of conservative Christians who supported Donald Trump despite his moral failures.)
2. CN may be related to theological beliefs, political sympathies, views on race and gender, and so on—but it is not synonymous or reducible to any of those things. It is a distinct phenomenon that must be understood on its own terms.
3. CN does not equal Christianity or evangelicalism, and the former often influences Christian behavior in ways that are opposite to the latter's legitimate practice.

In Chapter 1, Perry and Whitehead identify four categories of relationship to CN: Rejectors, Resistors, Accommodators, and Ambassadors. (Interestingly, though CN's Accommodators and Ambassadors are primarily political conservatives, not all of them are. CN is anchored on the right, but it spans the political spectrum.) Chapters 2 through 4 evaluate CN perspectives on power, boundaries, and order.

Analysis: I find Perry and Whitehead's definition of CN a helpful and, sadly, accurate description of much of what I have personally witnessed in the conservative South since 2016. In many respects, I share their alarm of the idolatrous relationship many Americans have with our nation. Of particular concern is their research which demonstrates the 'take America back for God' rhetoric is actually not about pursuing Christian or religious purposes, but is about the retention of political power. We cannot ignore how many Americans see God as a means to partisan, political ends.

That said, I have three criticisms of their book. First, I think at times they clumsily place too much conservative political action under the umbrella of CN. For example, they identify support of the wall on the Mexican border as "xenophobic". This is a sweeping generalization of motive that dismisses the complexities and severity of the immigration crisis. Second, though CN *is* partially responsible for the polariza-

tion of American discourse, their volume leaves readers with the impression that it is *mainly* or even *entirely* responsible. This fails to account for the corrosive and divisive effect that the ideologies of the political left have had on American society, as well. Third, it seems they think that Christians are only to live out their faith as individuals; any attempt by Christians to pursue wider cultural or community change is liable to be charged as CN. In the conclusion to chapter 2, they write "Christian nationalism mobilizes Americans to take positions on issues and rally behind candidates that will defend their cultural preferences, preserve their political influence, and maintain the 'proper' social order".[5] Are Christians not to have positions on issues, choose candidates, or have cultural preferences? Does not every American have a vision of some kind of social order? It would seem that Perry and Whitehead are insisting on Christian political disengagement and that anything else amounts to CN. This is a key problem in the discussion about CN, and I address it below.

Dan Partland & Rob Reiner have produced a documentary called *God and Country* which warns about the rise of Christian nationalism. Framed from a leftist position, they have similar concerns to Perry and Whitehead and interview the likes of Kristin Kobes Du Mez, Phil Vischer, Russell Moore and David French, all of whom have been vocal in their own streams about the dangers of Christian nationalism. In the film, David French defines CN as:

> *A deeply felt emotional connection between the fate of the nation and the fate of the church. So when someone says, 'America is in danger' at the heart level people are also thinking the church is in danger, my faith is in danger, my religious liberties - it's all a package.*

Phil Vischer says,

> *At a very basic level, it's the belief that America has a very special, God-ordained role in human history. But, here's the big issue, and it's a big issue for America: if I have decided that America is irreplaceable in God's story, that it has a role to play that only America can play in God's story, and democracy gets in the way, then democracy has to go.*

Indeed, pointing to the violence of January 6, 2021, the documentary presents CN as comparable to Nazism and a threat to both pluralism and democracy itself. In a podcast interview with Mike Cosper of Christianity Today, Partland and Reiner argue that CN is a movement that is essentially utilitarian, "a political movement that uses an issue, whatever the issue is, to get what you want, and you're willing to do anything for it. You'll do it at the point of a gun".

Analysis: Like Partland and Reiner, I remain horrified at what happened on January 6 and the Christian trappings used in its justification. Many of the clips of 'America-first' sermons throughout the documentary are cringe-inducing examples of what Perry and Whitehead have described. (Andrew Whitehead is interviewed in the film.) However, while I also support a broadly pluralistic society (since the gospel fares well in a free market), pluralism is not a transcendental good, which Partland and Reiner seem to think it is. In fact, there is some irony that the documentary presents democracy and pluralism as practically sacred—revealing another kind of syncretism. Furthermore, in the podcast, Reiner goes so far as to say that the teachings of Jesus are essentially identical to what is found in the rest of the world's religions. They may understand something of CN, but they clearly misunderstand Christianity. I found Trevin Wax's comments at TGC particularly helpful

> *In the end, these filmmakers are right to spot the danger in a political movement that harnesses and instrumentalizes the Christian faith toward some other end. Unfortunately, they can't see they're doing the same thing. They want to harness and instrumentalize the parts of Christianity that resonate with them as a way of bettering society according to their core, left-wing values.*

The fact is, criticisms of CN are not launched from nowhere—it is significant that many come from the political/cultural left, and are therefore fraught with their own biases and blindspots—and in this case, even a profound misunderstanding of what Christianity is.

Heidi Przybyla, an investigative journalist for Politico, has significantly broadened the scope of CN. In an interview on MSNBC, she claimed that anyone who thinks that human rights come from God (rather than the government) is a Christian nationalist—effectively indicating a significant percentage, if not the majority, of Americans in US history. In an article she co-wrote for Politico, warning about Trump's desire to 'infuse' CN into his second term, she criticized how Christians are using natural law "Natural law is the belief that there are universal rules derived from God that can't be superseded by government or judges. While it is a core pillar of Catholicism, in recent decades it's been used to oppose abortion, LGBTQ+ rights and contraception".

Analysis: The Declaration of Independence unambiguously asserts: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights". Such ignorance of history and civics, by an investigative journalist no less, should be of concern to all Americans. But the impact on Christianity is significant: now even basic Christian teaching and the application of natural law to long-standing ethical concerns are being labeled as Christian nationalism. (This also calls into question the viability of the CN terminology, since it now appears that it can mean anything to anyone.)

POSITIVE THEORIES

Patrick Schreiner wrote an essay for TGC titled "The Good, the Bad and the Ugly of Christian Nationalism". Under the section titled "The Good: The Influence of Christianity in American Civil Life", Schreiner writes, "For some, Christian nationalism simply means that Christianity has influenced and should continue to influence the nation". Though he admits that CN rarely refers to this limited sense, he says of it

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

Analysis: Schreiner's article is more focused on the Bad and the Ugly of CN, but I include his brief remarks on the Good because they reflect the fluidity of CN's usage and also demonstrate the tension that exists in competing definitions. What is being described here is a fairly traditional take on Christian civic engagement. Schreiner intends it to be a positive, restrained sense of CN, but what he is describing could be included within the pejorative use of the term by those who see any Christian activism as problematic.

Andrew Torba and Andrew Isker co-wrote *Christian nationalism: A Biblical Guide for Taking Dominion and Discipling Nations.* It is a biblical defense of CN, which they define as follows:

> *Christian Nationalism is loving your neighbor. Who is our neighbor? Our fellow citizens and especially our brothers and sisters in Christ. Loving them means protecting them from foreign interests, alien worldviews, and hostile invaders. Christian Nationalism means placing the interests of your neighbor and your home above the interests of foreigners in foreign nations. This doesn't mean we neglect foreign nations or do not extend love to them, but rather that we place the interests and worldview of our home above foreign ones. 1 Timothy 5:8 tells us that "if anyone does not provide for his own, and specially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an unbeliever." Nationalism is about taking care of our neighbors, our families and fellow citizens, lest we deny the faith and be worse than an unbeliever.*[6]

Torba and Isker insist they are not guilty of the charges that Perry and Whitehead make of CN. They disavow idolatry of the nation; they state that CN is not limited to any race, nation or culture; they do not believe America is chosen by God as a

new Promised Land; and they say that CN is not a "marriage of the gospel with patriotism".[7] Nor do they wish to overthrow the government. Rather, "after we have attained enough Christians in our nation, we are obliged to peacefully order our state governments in such a way as to help Christianity grow and flourish in our states without restrictions".[8] They also understand the US to be a union of states, and that the states are actually countries, many of which were founded with state religions. It is not their aim to recreate a 17th-century situation but rather to build a CN movement that is more ecumenical.

> *No longer do Christian nationalists in America seek to establish official state churches or religions, but rather we seek to reestablish states that recognize Jesus Christ as King, the general Christian faith as the foundation of state government, and state laws that reflect (in every way possible and reasonable) Christian morality and charity.*[9]

The rest of the book goes on to make their case. They insist that America *is* a Christian nation; they criticize the individualistic piety of low-Church evangelicalism which, they say, downplays the understanding of Christ's Kingdom and political engagement; they heavily criticize dispensationalism and make the case for an alternative eschatology; they rage against critical race theory, cultural marxism, wokeness, luke-warm Christianity, and more. The book ends with a history of the founding of the American colonies in a defense of seeing the origin of the country as "Christian nationalist".

Analysis: I suspect most readers of this paper will be put off by the tone of this book and some of its specific arguments. However, I also suspect that most evangelicals would agree with more of it than they might anticipate (even if reluctantly). Hence Peter Leithart's assessment that the book is "flawed but generally sound". My biggest point of disagreement is with the eschatological argument. Though they don't name their views, their presentation is strongly of the postmillennial flavour (more on this below), and much of their thesis depends on this position. I am not a postmillennial, and so I do not share their conclusions. With Leithart, I also found their distinction between Christianity and Judaism to be too severe.[10] Given their frustration about how much CN has been mischaracterized in the press, I was disappointed at the lack of graciousness with opposing Christian views and the mischaracterization of some of them, especially in Chapter 6. Though unpersuaded to join their project, I don't think Torba and Isker are proposing anything particularly controversial given their postmillennialism, and certainly not something that threatens democracy or the witness of the Church.

Stephen Wolfe is the author of the incendiary *The Case for Christian Nationalism.* (Both his book and Torba/Isker's came out in 2022.) One of the first to embrace the term, Wolfe offers a positive case for it from a far-right, Reformed perspective. He defines CN as

A totality of national action, consisting of civil laws and social customs, conducted by a Christian nation as a Christian nation, in order to procure for itself both earthly and heavenly good in Christ."[11]

He sees CN as a sub-genus of nationalism and assumes that groups/nations should and will work together for their own common good. He also distinguishes his book as a work of political theory, not political theology. Thus, he assumes a Reformed theological tradition and spends little time in the biblical texts. Wolfe's arguments are robust and are centered on the nature of man (he engages in theological anthropology and how that shapes social and political life), the nature of civil government (which he argues should enforce *both* Tables of the 10 Commandments[12]), and the nature of the magistrate (which he calls The Christian Prince). Furthermore, Wolfe makes a defense of cultural Christianity, he includes a chapter on revolution and one on liberty of conscience, and he offers his analysis of Protestant experience in early America. Many of Wolfe's conclusions will likely be rejected outright by evangelical readers (e.g. the civil magistrate should have the authority to punish blasphemy and heresy), but it is worth pointing out that his views are rooted in a coherent, historical tradition.

Analysis: Both Neil Shenvi and Kevin DeYoung have written substantial reviews of Wolfe's book. Given the sophistication of Wolfe's arguments, I feel somewhat unqualified to write my own and instead will draw on Shenvi and DeYoung's insights. Both helpfully point out that Wolfe's book has many strengths that its critics often overlook and, importantly, Wolfe's presentation of CN is not of the popular variety described by Perry and Whitehead. (For example, of flags in the church building, Wolfe writes, "I'm ambivalent about national flags located inside or outside churches, but national flags should not be displayed in a sanctuary and especially not within sight during worship. The worshipper should see pulpit, table, and font".[13])

However, Wolfe's use of the concepts of 'nation' and 'ethnicity' are both confusing and problematic. For example, he argues that ethnicity is 'your people' and that an ethnic group can be multi-racial. But he goes on to say, "People of different ethnic groups can exercise respect for difference, conduct some routine business with each other, join in inter-ethnic alliances for mutual good, and exercise common humanity (e.g., the good Samaritan), *"but they cannot have a life together that goes beyond mutual alliance"*[14] [emphasis mine]. Wolfe's project has been plagued with accusations of kinism, which he exacerbated with some foolish tweets on inter-racial marriage (which he later retracted). But even if we set the tweets aside, Shenvi persuasively shows that Wolfe's formulation of nations and ethnicities seems to create division, not unity within the church. Indeed, Wolfe says we should become more like non-Westerners "more exclusive and ethnic-focused".[15] This seems to fly in the face of Ephesians 2 and a basic understanding of the gospel's horizontal, reconciling effects.

Furthermore, in the twitter-sphere, CN has been occasionally connected to ugly forms of physiognomy. In his epilogue, Wolfe contributes to this impression when he writes:

> *Christian nationalism should have a strong and austere aesthetic. I was dismayed when I saw the attendees of a recent PCA General Assembly—men in wrinkled, short-sleeve, golf shirts, sitting plump in their seats. We have to do better. Pursue your potential. Lift weights, eat right, and lose the dad bod. We don't all have to become bodybuilders, but we ought to be men of power and endurance. We cannot achieve our goals with such a flabby aesthetic vision and under the control of modern nutrition. Sneering at this aesthetic vision, which I fully expect to happen, is pure cope. Grace does not destroy T-levels; grace does not perfect testosterone into estrogen. If our opponents want to be fat, have low testosterone, and chug vegetable oil, let them. It won't be us.*[16]

DeYoung notes that the epilogue, different in tone to the rest of the book, reads like a rant. In paragraphs like the one mentioned above, the gloves seem to come off, and Wolfe's proposal of CN feels less 'magisterially Protestant' and more like an angry, personal vendetta. Much more can be said about Wolfe's proposal, but ultimately, I join Shenvi and DeYoung in rejecting it.

SYNTHESIZING THE THEORIES

Though more could be said, this should suffice as a survey of some current CN theories. What should become clear is that, though there are definite sides to the debate, they are not exactly lined up directly across from one another. What Perry and Whitehead describe is not what either Torba/Isker or Wolfe embrace. We might label the former '**pop-CN**' and the latter '**classical-CN**. Perhaps these terms are unhelpful—I wish only to distinguish them so that each may be properly evaluated on their own merits. It is my view that the former, where it legitimately exists, is unequivocally syncretistic and idolatrous and therefore should be condemned. (For a more balanced assessment of this kind of CN within the broader ideology of nationalism, and an explanation for why conservative Protestants are uniquely vulnerable to it, I recommend *Political Visions and Illusions: A Survey and Christian Critique of Contemporary Ideologies* by David T. Koyzis, in particular Chapter 4, titled "Nationalism: The Jealous God of Nation".[17]) Classical-CN, however, must be considered more carefully, for reasons that will be seen below.

Before taking sides in these arguments, three issues must be untangled from the CN discourse to avoid superficial criticisms of CN and misguided uses of the terminology. They are undefined political theology, inconsistent political disengagement, and failures to recognize the theological issues at play, in particular eschatology and the Kingdom of God.

Undefined Political Theology

The first issue that must be separated from CN is the field of political theology. Many Christians are using CN terminology to attack political theologies they fail to understand and/or wrongly assume to be novel ideas rather than historic ones.

Political theology can be understood as "efforts to probe the implications of the church's beliefs, practices and Scriptures for political, social and/or economic realities".[18] Scripture has much to say on how Christians should submit to their governments, but it has virtually nothing to say about how Christians should (or should not) wield power on behalf of the state in a constitutional republic—or a monarchy or any form of government, for that matter. Christian governance was simply not a reality of the NT age. Therefore, it should not be a surprise that Christians have found very different solutions to civic governance throughout the centuries. Since the days of Constantine, there have been nearly endless attempts to properly configure the 'church' and the 'state' in relationship with one another. Though space prohibits a thorough summary of these ideas, the Reformation yielded significant developments that still heavily influence political theologies today:

- Martin Luther was the father of the 'two kingdoms' concept. He believed that God ordained two kingdoms, one sacred (the church) and one secular (the state), each with its own functions. However, only the state has been granted the right to wield the sword.
- John Calvin agreed with Luther that there were two, distinct realms, but believed they should work much closer together, as evidenced in his Protestant city of Geneva. In his three-fold use of the law, the second use is the restraint of society. Thus the state, though incapable of creating inner transformation in the life of the believer, is responsible for enforcing the laws of God.
- The Anabaptists believed that neither the church as an organization nor Christians as individuals should have anything to do with the state apparatus. In their view, military, political, and civic service are all off-limits for Christians.

Since the Reformation, there have been many more proposals, often related to increasingly sophisticated questions about how the church is to relate to culture and society more broadly. H. Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture*, though now quite dated, summarized approaches to Christian cultural engagement as follows: Christ against culture, Christ of culture, Christ above culture, Christ and culture in paradox, and Christ the transformer of culture. Though this grid has been re-assessed and critiqued many times over, it helpfully illustrates the plurality of ways Christians have understood the relationship between the church and the culture around us.

Fundamentally, most Christians in US history have believed that politics and the mechanism of the state are appropriate means by which Christians may engage with culture and public life. This has been true of both the Christian Right and the Christian Left. Those who are against Christian political activity of any kind are in the definite minority, and this conviction is still largely connected to the Anabaptist movement and voices like John Howard Yoder and Stanley Hauerwas.

Unless one is prepared to take the Anabaptist position, the ethical questions related to cultural change, political engagement, and the public sphere are profoundly complicated. What should the relationship of the church and state be? Can Christians utilize the state's power without being corrupted by it or perpetuating injustice? To what extent should Christians leverage their faith in the public sphere in a pluralistic society? As James Woods has asked, "Is there a Christian case for commitment to the nation?" And as Peter Leithart has asked, "What do we mean by nation?" What is the difference between nationalism and patriotism? And so on. As evangelicals, we have not all wrestled with these questions or attempted to place them in a coherent system. And as we have seen from Perry and Whitehead, the expectation is increasingly that we keep our faith private. (And as Shenvi and DeYoung acknowledge, Wolfe's proposal, for all its weaknesses, is one of the few that is tied to a historical tradition.) The point is this: any attempt to provide answers to the above questions (which I think we should attempt), or to actually *do* political theology, is likely to receive the charge of Christian Nationalism from someone.

In Part 5 of *Center Church*, Tim Keller maps his four, broad models of cultural transformation (Two Kingdoms, Relevance, Counterculturalist and Transformationist) onto a helpful diagram which I have pasted below.[19] In Chapter 18, titled "Cultural Engagement Through Blended Insights", Keller dismisses the idea that a "perfect union" of all models is possible; at the end of the day, we need to pin our colors to a mast. But he gives very helpful guidance on how to synthesize convictions, seasons, giftings, and calling as we each develop our own views of how Christ relates to culture, which will then inform how we approach governance and politics.

Finally, the argument I am making here is not for one particular type of political theology. Rather, I am recommending that pastors attempt to formulate their own convictions in this regard. As it stands, "Christian nationalism" has become an easy pejorative with which to accuse anyone to one's political right. By developing coherent cultural and political theologies, we can be more judicious in our use of this term and our analysis of those who arrive at different conclusions.

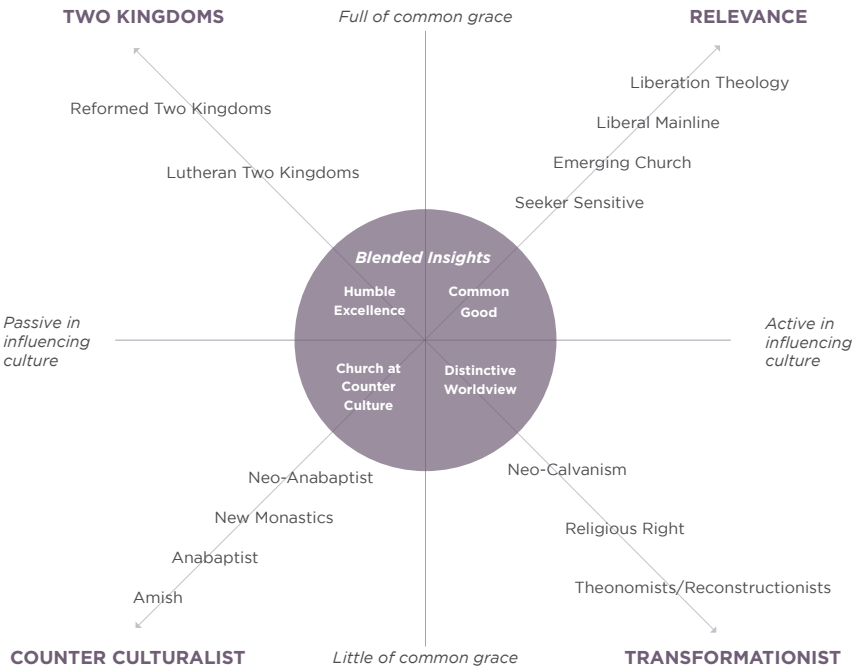

Figure 1, taken from page 231 of Center Church *by Tim Keller*

The Rise of Political Disengagement

The rise of political disengagement, or political passivity, has been another key influence on the trajectory of CN conversations. Several likely causes are at play.

Perhaps in response to a perceived union of theological and political conservatism, many evangelicals are increasingly suspicious of political and cultural power. Michael Horton's 2008 *Christless Christianity: The Alternative Gospel of the American Church* was a classic expression of this unease. His book opens with a reference to a sermon from Presbyterian minister Donald Grey Barnhouse, in which he imagined Satan taking control of cities:

> *All of the bars would be closed, pornography banished, and pristine streets would be filled with tidy pedestrians who smiled at each other. There would be no swearing. The children would say "Yes, sir" and "No, ma'am," and the churches would be full every Sunday…where Christ is not preached.* [20]

What is being described here is "cultural Christianity," a concept that evangelicals often use negatively in reference to the hypocritical expression of faith.[21] In some cases, evangelicals have been so concerned with this hypocrisy, that they have even celebrated the end of Christian influence. For example, in 2015 Russell Moore wrote that the days of Bible-belt Christianity were essentially coming to an end, adding, "good riddance to them". In his view, even things like 'traditional family values' become suspect when practiced at large but without a primary motivation of obedience to Christ. This apprehension about cultural Christianity has surely contributed to the evangelical retreat from the public square.

A second cause of evangelical disengagement has been the out-sized influence of James Davison Hunter's 2010 book *To Change the World*. Hunter identifies three "paradigms of cultural engagement" that are specific to contemporary, North American Christianity: 'Defensive Against' (typical of the fundamentalist conservatism of the Religious Right), 'Relevance To' (typical of the liberal mainline Religious Left, progressive evangelicals, the "seeker-sensitive" movement, and the "emerging church" movement), and 'Purity From' (typical of neo-Anabaptists, some evangelical conservatives, most Pentecostals and the "new monasticism").[22] Following this analysis, Hunter provides his own proposal called 'Faithful Presence.' He sees the future of Christian power as "postpolitical" and writes: "It may be that the healthiest course of action for Christians, on this count, is to be silent for a season and learn how to enact their faith in public through acts of shalom rather than to try again to represent it publicly through law, policy, and political mobilization."[23] Although Hunter's 'Faithful Presence' has been criticized as "too passive and concessionary,"[24] his analysis of the other three paradigms has been highly acclaimed, and his work was a major influence on Tim Keller. Through Keller's ministry, Hunter's "postpolitical approach" has shaped large swaths of evangelicalism. And despite his claims in the book that 'Faithful Presence' does not mean civic privatism, it's hard to see how it would lead to anything else.

In the wake of these developments and the decline of Christian influence in the West, a question has crystallized: Should Christians use the civic sphere to actively promote a Christian lifestyle amongst people who are not all genuinely Christian? More and more, it seems that pastors and Christian leaders are answering that question in the negative, even when speaking of majority-Christian contexts.[25] Such an instinct, however, reflects a kind of neo-Anabaptism that is being selectively and inconsistently applied.

For example, I think nearly all Christians would say that the abolitionist movement was an unqualified good—regardless of whether slavery was abolished in obedience to Christ or not. Similarly, we recognize that pornography is destructive to communities and we believe that people will flourish more without it—regardless of whether the refusal of porn is made in God's honor. And of course, we want both Christians

and non-Christians to stop getting abortions, regardless of motive. Yet all of these are rooted in Christian beliefs and are therefore part of what might be called a Christian lifestyle. Without a coherent framework that accounts for how we want laws, culture, and society to be formed, convictions such as these can begin to feel arbitrary. *Some* political/societal action is celebrated, but *other* political/societal action is decried as Christian Nationalism. It's all very ad hoc.

In a recent TGC video on Christian nationalism (on the whole, an illuminating discussion), one of the exchanges well illustrates the problem I am describing. Bob Thune asks his fellow panelists about how our convictions on God, Christ, and the scriptures should inform our public policy. Andy Davis replies by contrasting how Christ's Kingdom advances by martyrdom, whereas the kingdoms of the world advance with the sword. Here's how the dialogue plays out

> **Andy** "We seek to persuade. We seek to exemplify godliness. We seek to pray for people and be willing to lay down our lives. The government uses the sword, it's what it's designed to do. I'm uncomfortable with the marrying of those two."
>
> **Bob** "But that doesn't help me much if I'm a Christian who's running for office or who's on the school board or who's on the city council. That's where the question gets interesting to me: there's a lot of people in our churches who can keep those two worlds separate, but there's many who can't . . . Taking that a step further, Andy, what would you say to someone who does have a responsibility to instantiate public policy in some way?"
>
> **Andy** [After a brief anecdote]... "That's the challenge".

Unfortunately, Andy is either unwilling or unable to elaborate. And yet, later in the video, he goes on to argue that competence in governance is vital. This dialogue highlights the problem facing evangelical leaders. Our initial responses to the complexities of the public sphere are often avoidant, pietistic, and quasi-Anabaptistic. And yet, contra Anabaptism, we *do* want at least some Christians to become competent public servants. Our selectively applied political disengagement is sending a confusing set of mixed messages and has created an ethical vacuum that the ambiguous term 'Christian nationalism' is now filling.

Theological Issues

The third area of interest that relates to the CN conversation is explicitly theological: eschatology and the Kingdom of God. We will consider them in turn.

ESCHATOLOGY

In *Reformed Theology,* Michael Allen writes

> *The real issue involved in the relationship of Christianity and culture, therefore, is the way in which eschatology and salvation relate. How does the redemption brought by Christ play itself out over the course of the plan of God? In what time and at what pace will these things happen?*[26]

What Christians believe about the end, and in particular the millennium, will strongly influence what they believe about Christians' responsibility to change (or not change) culture in the present. In fact, it may be the most important *theological* belief that shapes one's positions on political theology and CN.

Postmillennialism, in particular, teaches that Christians are to work for the transformation of society prior to Christ's return and is generally connected to the Christian theonomy movement. Of the different views of the millennium, it is the most optimistic about cultural engagement, and therefore the most likely to align with proposals like Torba/Isker's and Stephen Wolfe's. (Anecdotally, most of the CN advocates I follow on Twitter are postmillennial.) In contrast, premillennialism, and in some cases amillennialism, tend to be more pessimistic about the present age and therefore less optimistic about the change that is possible. In the debates over CN, both pre-mill and post-mill adherents have pointed to these eschatological differences, though they present the issues differently.

Whereas postmillennialism may find a kindred spirit in Stephen Wolfe's proposal, pop-dispensationalism is often connected to 'pop-CN'. Daniel Hummell, author of *The Rise and Fall of Dispensationalism,* observes that "under-theologized, pop-dispensationalism" has spread while "scholarly dispensationalism" has been in rapid decline. Under the influence of figures like John Hagee and Paula White, Christian political activism in the US has been 'Pentecostalized'. However, that new activism is not classically dispensational, but heavily modified. It still maintains strong support for Israel, but does so without explicitly theological or properly eschatological underpinnings. It is beyond the scope of this paper to fully explore the evolution of dispensationalism in the US. The point I wish to make here is that the Wolfe/Torba

flavor of CN is far more connected to the eschatology of Reformed postmillennialism than dispensationalism, despite appearances to the contrary, while 'pop-CN' is loosely connected to a kind of pop-dispensationalism widely prevalent in the US.

THE KINGDOM OF GOD

Tim Keller observes: "It is evident that one of the main reasons for many of the divergent approaches to cultural engagement—among many aspects of ministry today—is differing views of the nature of the kingdom".[27] These differing views are partially a result of exegetical disagreement: what did Jesus mean when he spoke of the Kingdom of God?

RT France believes that the Greek word *basileia* should be translated as 'reign', 'rule', or 'sovereignty because the modern meaning of 'kingdom' unhelpfully suggests a specific place or people group under the control of a king, such as The United Kingdom. It is worth quoting him here at length:

> *"The kingdom of God" is not making a statement about a "thing" called "the kingdom," but about God, that he is king. Thus, "the kingdom of God has come near" means "God is taking over as king," and to* ***"enter the kingdom of God" is to come under his rule, to accept him as king . . .*** *The classical debate among modern theologians as to whether the kingdom of God should be understood as already "realized" in Jesus' ministry (Dodd) or still wholly future (Schweitzer) can thus be seen as a false trail. It is based on the wrong assumption that "the kingdom of God" denoted a particular time or state of affairs within history. Instead, the term is a dynamic expression for any and every situation in which God is king, his authority exercised, and his will done . . . As long as God continues to allow his world to resist his rule, so long will there be tension and paradox built into the language of the "kingdom of God."*[28]

Based on these insights, a natural question arises: what, then, is the difference between the kingdom and the church? This is perhaps the most difficult of the many challenging questions related to the Kingdom of God. I will present two views.

Geerhardus Vos, in his book, *The Teaching of Jesus Concerning the Kingdom of God and the Church,* writes of the invisible church:

> *From what has been said it appears that every view which would keep the kingdom and the church separate as two entirely distinct spheres is not in harmony with the trend of our Lord's teaching. The church is a form which the kingdom assumes in result of the new stage upon which the Messiahship of Jesus enters with his death and resurrection.* ***So far as extent of membership is concerned,***

> ***Jesus plainly leads us to identify the invisible church and the kingdom. It is impossible to be in the one without being in the other.***[29]

This is not to say no distinctions can be made between the invisible church and the kingdom (indeed, several can[30]), but Vos insists that the line that marks the boundary of both is regeneration, which corresponds to France's understanding of the kingdom God.

Of the visible church, we can affirm that it is an expression or manifestation of the invisible kingdom, but it does not constitute the entire thing. Vos says that whenever any sphere of life (art, science, etc) "comes under the controlling influence of the principle of the divine supremacy and glory, and this outwardly reveals itself, there we can truly say that the kingdom of God has become manifest."[31] This means that both the institutional (visible) church and the individual Christian contribute to expressions of the Kingdom.

However, he asserts that Christ never intended that all spheres of life should be subject to the visible church: the church should not control the state. But what if those who control the state are regenerate? Vos continues

> *While it is proper to separate between the visible church and such things as the Christian state, Christian art, Christian science, etc., these things, if they truly belong to the kingdom of God, grow up out of the regenerated life of the invisible church.*[32]

George Ladd presents an alternative view. In *A Theology of the New Testament*, he writes

> *The Kingdom is primarily the dynamic reign or kingly rule of God, and, derivatively, the sphere in which the rule is experienced. In biblical idiom, the Kingdom is not identified with its subjects. They are the people of God's rule who enter it, live under it, and are governed by it.* ***The church is the community of the Kingdom but never the Kingdom itself.*** *Jesus' disciples belong to the Kingdom as the Kingdom belongs to them; but they are not the Kingdom. The Kingdom is the rule of God; the church is a society of women and men.*[33]

He goes on to argue that not only is the church not the Kingdom, the Kingdom creates the church, the church witnesses to the Kingdom, the church is the instrument of the Kingdom, and that the church is the custodian of the Kingdom.

Taking a comprehensive view of the Kingdom, it would seem that it should include more than regenerated souls, unless we are to believe that the non-human part of creation is excluded. If only for this reason, I tend to side with Ladd.

But both theologians make important contributions here. We can agree with Ladd that the church and Kingdom are not the same. Confusing them increases the probability that expressions of the kingdom (like Christians in positions of governance) automatically fall within the domain of the church. This is a slippery slope to a conflation of the church and state. But as Ladd acknowledges, neither the Kingdom nor the church can exist without the other.[34] Since the church is the instrument and custodian of the kingdom, the church and the church alone manifests the Kingdom. Thus, Vos's point is still critical, that both the institutional church and the individual Christian participate in bringing the Kingdom to bear on the world. Keller makes this observation of Vos's perspective

> *There is a tendency to see the kingdom as either strictly spiritual and operating within the church or mainly social and operating in the liberation movements out in the world. Vos's biblical balance will enable us to avoid imbalances in the cultural engagement and missional church debates in particular.*[35]

How we understand the Kingdom will surely influence how we seek to advance it in the public square. In theory, a country led entirely by Christians in accordance with Christian principles would be, in some sense, an expression of the Kingdom. (Thus, the question of whether a nation can be 'Christian' is, ultimately, semantic.) I suspect this is something all Christians desire. What it should be called and how it should be pursued are the questions with which we're grappling.

A final thought on eschatology and the Kingdom of God: as we have already said, 'classical CN' is primarily linked to postmillennialism. However, that belief is inextricably linked to a very specific understanding of the Kingdom: "In postmillennial thought, the kingdom of God is viewed as a present reality, here and now, rather than a future, heavenly realm . . . Its growth will be extensive (it will spread throughout the entire world) and intensive (it will become dominant.)"[36] Much of what Torba and Isker, in particular, argue is based on a *theological* conviction that the gospel will triumph in this age because the Kingdom is slowly and steadily advancing. Though their views are couched in the language of 'Christian nationalism', they are mainly advancing the logical conclusions of their theological beliefs.

Conclusion: Toward a more robust assessment of political and civic engagement

As I said above, the Christian nationalism that Perry and Whitehead defined (what I have called 'pop-CN') is deeply problematic. Idolatry is perhaps the gravest sin of the Bible, the "fundamental crime against Yahweh'.[37] Should God and/or the gospel become means to ends other than God's own glory, then we know that idolatry of some kind is afoot. We are right to call such things demonic and judge them accordingly.

But I am also suspicious that everywhere the term CN is used, such syncretism has actually occurred. (We may reject the arguments for what I have called 'classical CN'—but that does make it synonymous with the popular variant.) I am also nervous that evangelicals are being bullied out of the public square with injudicious accusations of Christian nationalism. And I am concerned with our inability to articulate coherent strategies of cultural and political engagement.

My recommendation is that evangelical pastors and leaders, especially in the US, should develop their own views on political theology at a principled and foundational level rather than starting with the downstream issues. The rise of the conservative far-right (e.g., Stephen Wolfe) has been possible largely because of the evangelical retreat in these matters.

As a starting point, Brad East has provided a framework that is perhaps more helpful than either Niebuhr's or Hunter's for cultural engagement. Rather than a one-size-fits-all approach, East suggests four ways to interact with culture and points out that they are not mutually exclusive—sometimes we may need to use more than one at the same time. He identifies them as Resistance, Repentance, Reception, and Reform; for fuller descriptions of what he means by these terms, his essay is worth reading in its entirety. However, even the application of these concepts must be founded in some kind of political theology—and indeed it will be, whether that political theology be thoughtfully crafted or ignorantly assumed piecemeal.

It is likely that, within our movement, there is a wide spectrum of ideas and convictions about how Christians should participate in the public sphere and in culture change. Let's work to determine our own views on these matters and give one another the best possible hearing. Let's remember that some of our questions are ancient (e.g. the nature of the millennium) while some are quite recent in world history (e.g. how Christians should participate in democratic and constitutional republics).[38] And let's also be cautious that we don't use the term Christian nationalism as a cheap insult for political views with which we disagree, or perhaps simply don't understand. On this subject, in particular, we could use less heat and more light.

Endnotes

1. Matthew McCullough, *The Cross of War: Christian Nationalism and U.S. Expansion in the Spanish-American War* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2014), 4.

2. McCullough, *The Cross of War: Christian Nationalism and U.S. Expansion in the Spanish-American War,* 5.

3. Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry, *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2020), 10.

4. Whitehead and Perry, *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States,* 15.

5. Whitehead and Perry, *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States,* 87.

6. Andrew Torba and Andrew Isker, *Christian Nationalism: A Biblical Guide for Taking Dominion and Discipling Nations* (Gab AI Inc, 2022), 17.

7. Torba and Isker, Christian Nationalism: *A Biblical Guide for Taking Dominion and Discipling Nations,* 18.

8. Torba and Isker, Christian Nationalism: *A Biblical Guide for Taking Dominion and Discipling Nations,* 10.

9. Torba and Isker, Christian Nationalism: *A Biblical Guide for Taking Dominion and Discipling Nations,* 14.

10. Torba has been accused of anti-semitism for posts he has made on social media, but the book strongly condemns both anti-semitism and racism. I have focused my comments on the content of the book.

11. Stephen Wolfe, *The Case for Christian Nationalism* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2022), 10.

12. Wolfe, *The Case for Christian Nationalism,* 363.

13. Wolfe, *The Case for Christian Nationalism,* 240.

14. Wolfe, *The Case for Christian Nationalism,* 148.

15. Wolfe, *The Case for Christian Nationalism,* 459.

16. Wolfe, *The Case for Christian Nationalism,* 469–70.

17. Koyzis makes two powerful observations. First is that the "normative Christian political theory sees the state as an institution built on the exercise of power and guided by the principle of public justice . . . By contrast, nationalism sees the state as the instrument of the nation's aspirations and expression of its will." These differing views of the state are partly (though not entirely) what makes nationalism inherently idolatrous: the state takes on a god-like role. Second, Koyzis shows that every ideology has its own redemptive story, and that American conservative Protestants are particularly vulnerable to conflating redemptive story of nationalism with the redemptive story of the Bible, specifically from the Old Testament. See David T. Koyzis, *Political Visions & Illusions: A Survey and Christian Critique of Contemporary Ideologies, Second Edition.* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019), 1–25 and 90–119.

18. K. Deede Johnson, *"Political Theology," in The Evangelical Dictionary of Theology,* ed. Daniel J. Treier and Walter A. Elwell, Third Edition. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017), 674.

19. Many thanks to Matt Hosier for pointing me to Keller's work while reviewing this paper.

20. Michael Scott Horton, *Christless Christianity: The Alternative Gospel of the American Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008), 15.

21. For more positive views of Cultural Christianity see this article or this short video.

22. 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), 213–19.

23. Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World,* 280–81.

24. Daniel Strange, *"Faithful Presence: A Theology for the Trenches?," in Revisiting "Faithful Presence": To Change the World Five Years Later,* ed. Collin Hansen (Deerfield, IL: The Gospel Coalition, 2015), 48.

25. For example, the document "National Conservatism: A Statement of Principles" includes this sentence: *"Where a Christian majority exists, public life should be rooted in Christianity and its moral vision, which should be honored by the state and other institutions both public and private."* David French sees this as an "an extraordinary — and ominous — ideological statement, one that would immediately relegate non-Christians to second-class status."

26. R. Michael Allen, *Reformed Theology* (London: Continuum International Pub. Group, 2010), 164.

27. Timothy Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry In Your City* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 229.

28. R.T. France, "The Kingdom of God," in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible,* ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer et al. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 420, 422.

29. Geerhardus Vos, *The Teaching of Jesus Concerning the Kingdom of God and the Church* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1903), 158–59.

30. “It may be said that the kingdom designates believers in their relation to God as ruler, the church believers in their separateness from the world and their organic union with one another. Or, that the church designates believers in their attitude of worship towards God, the kingdom, believers in their ethical activities towards one another. Or again, that the church designates the people of God from the point of view of their calling to be God’s instrument in preparing the way for and introducing the ideal order of things, the kingdom, the same people of God so far as they possess the ideal order in principle realized among themselves.” Vos, *The Teaching of Jesus Concerning the Kingdom of God and the Church,* 159–60.

31. Vos, *The Teaching of Jesus Concerning the Kingdom of God and the Church,* 163.

32. Vos, *The Teaching of Jesus Concerning the Kingdom of God and the Church,* 165.

33. George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament, Revised Edition.* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 109.

34. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament,* 117.

35. Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry In Your City,* 230.

36. Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology,* 3rd Edition. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 1108.

37. R. Barrett, “Idols, Idolatry, Gods,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Prophets,* ed. Mark J. Boda and J. G. McConville, IVP Bible Dictionary Series (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2012), 351.

38. And yet even in these questions, ancient thinkers like Augustine can be great helps.