

A PASTORAL LETTER FROM THE BISHOP



THE CRISIS OF CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM

"So then, you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone;" –Ephesians 2:19-20

Dear Siblings in Christ,

In our baptismal vows, we promise to renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world, and seek repentance and forgiveness of our sins. We promise to accept the freedom and power God gives us to stand against evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves as we strive for justice and peace among all people, respecting the dignity of every human being. We confess that Jesus Christ is our Savior and pledge to put our whole trust in his grace as we seek after truth. These promises and pledges are the foundation of our faith in Jesus Christ and our covenant with each other as we live out the Good News.

As followers of Jesus Christ, grounded in the understanding that God's love is all-encompassing and encompasses all, we find ourselves at a critical crossroads in addressing the forces of division in our day. Over the last few years, there has been an alarming rise in the dangerous ideology of Christian nationalism. Rooted in a conflation of faith and national identity, this ideological movement distorts the Gospel of Jesus, misusing Christianity to justify division, exclusion, inequality, racism, and supremacy.

This ideology further demands that laws, culture, and public policies be based on a distorted interpretation of the Gospel that elevates power and control over love. These ideologies are in direct contradiction with our faith. As members of the Body of Christ, we proclaim a message of love, justice, and reconciliation. However, Christian nationalism stands in direct opposition to these values. By falsely asserting that Christianity requires allegiance to a single nation or culture, this ideology betrays the universal nature of Christ's mission. It often promotes exclusionary practices, fosters systemic racism, and seeks to create an environment where only a select group is seen as deserving of God's grace.

Christian nationalism, which aligns and often equates the cross with the flag, intentionally blurs the division between our faith in a loving, liberating, and life-giving God and national pride. It further claims that the United States of America was formed as a "Christian nation" and that Christianity should occupy a privileged place. It conflates the cross, a symbol of our hope in the resurrection of our Savior Jesus Christ as a means of salvation and grace, with the flag, a symbol of national unity which honors the hard-fought freedoms won by brave women and men who willingly sacrificed for its purpose and the cause of peace. As people of faith, we can take pride in the achievement and values of our nation while being true to the Gospel's call to, "love our neighbors as ourselves."

As a means of ensuring that there is no symbolic confusion or conflation of the placement of the American flag in our houses of worship with the ideology of Christian nationalism, I am directing the clergy and congregations within the Episcopal Diocese of Missouri to contextualize the flag by properly placing it outside the altar area and next to rolls of honor, books of remembrance, or service memorials to those who served. By intentionally placing the flag adjacent to these symbols of honor dedicated to those who offered their service, and those who sacrificed their very lives for the cause of freedom in this nation, we give proper dignity to our nation's flag while preserving the integrity of our first allegiance to God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Since we are a Church that celebrates the dignity of every human being, we therefore have a sacred duty to resist any ideology that seeks to divide or diminish God's children. Christian nationalism has often been weaponized to justify acts of hatred and oppression, harming our siblings in Christ—particularly people of color, immigrants, religious minorities, women, and other marginalized communities. This ideology betrays not just our faith in Jesus but also the very flag to which so many of our siblings have pledged allegiance, offered service, or made the ultimate sacrifice.

Our Baptismal Covenant calls us to "strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being." In opposing Christian nationalism, we reaffirm this commitment and proclaim that our faith is not a tool for exclusion but a bridge to greater understanding, compassion, and unity.

May we bear witness to Christ's love in all that we do. May we in both word and deed proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ—a message that transcends the divisions of this world and brings healing, justice, and peace to all God's people.

Yours in Christ,



The Rt. Rev. Deon K. Johnson
XI Bishop of Missouri



*O God,
you have bound us together
in a common life. Help us,
in the midst of our struggles
for justice and truth, to confront
one another without hatred or bitterness,
and to work together with mutual
forbearance and respect;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.*



A BRIEF HISTORY OF CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM

INTRODUCTION

Christian nationalism is a political and cultural ideology that merges Christianity with national identity, advocating for the influence of Christian values in government and society. The roots of Christian nationalism trace back to the early relationship between religion and state power in the Roman Empire after Christianity was legalized under Emperor Constantine in the 4th century. The idea of a nation tied to Christian identity persisted through the Middle Ages, particularly in the concept of Christendom, where European rulers justified their authority through divine sanction.

Christian nationalism gained prominence in the U.S. in the 19th and 20th centuries, often tied to ideas of manifest destiny and the belief that America was divinely chosen. During the Cold War, Christian nationalist rhetoric intensified, positioning the U.S. as a Christian bulwark against atheistic communism. The American flag and the cross were inextricably joined in this movement as a way of symbolically showing the collusion of religious belief and allegiance to the State.

The American flag has not always been a fixture in American sanctuaries. When it was introduced, it came for reasons specific to historic moments. For example, American history scholars agree that flags became more common in American churches during World War I. Those who refused to place flags in their sanctuaries were accused of being pro-German. In the 1910s, the Ku Klux Klan revived as an anti-immigrant, anti-integration, and anti-Communist movement, donated flags to southern churches, including parts of Missouri, and insisted that they be displayed in sanctuaries. During World War II and the fervent anti-communism of the 1950s, the failure to display flags in sanctuaries was considered un-American.

In addition, the original Pledge of Allegiance, written by a Baptist minister did not originally include the words, "under God." Those words were added in the 1950s, as the United States sought to contrast itself as a religious people against the godless communists of the Soviet Union.

Also, in the 1950s, the United States adopted "In God We Trust" as its official motto, which was placed on US currency. This phrase originated in the American Civil War as part of a Union response to the Confederate claim that the Confederate States of America was, in fact, a Christian nation.

HOW HAS THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH RESPONDED TO CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM?

The Episcopal Church has actively addressed the challenges posed by Christian nationalism, emphasizing the importance of upholding democratic principles and social justice.

In 2022 the House of Bishops Theology Committee presented a study of Christian nationalism. The committee's methodology in an Anglican framework of scripture, tradition, reason, and liturgy sheds light on the foundation of the movement and a path forward. They argue that Christian nationalism is sinful and violates the first and second of the Ten Commandments. Through careful examination of Christian nationalism, the Theology Committee warns members of the church not to fall into its trap, but instead to be a light to the world.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

THE CRISIS OF CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM THEOLOGICAL REPORT

Q. What is the report about?

A. The report, *The Crisis of Christian Nationalism*, explores the rise and influence of Christian nationalism in the United States. It examines the movement's theological implications, historical roots, and societal consequences, particularly its connections to white supremacy, the distortion of Christianity, and its threat to democracy.

Q. Who created the report?

A. The report was prepared by the House of Bishops Theology Committee of The Episcopal Church. It was commissioned in 2022 by Presiding Bishop Michael B. Curry in response to the increasing prominence of Christian nationalism.

Q. Why is Christian nationalism a concern for The Episcopal Church?

A. Christian nationalism distorts the core teachings of Christianity, undermines the principles of inclusion and equality, and perpetuates social divisions. The Episcopal Church believes that it is a theological and moral imperative to challenge ideologies that harm individuals and communities.

Q. Does the report provide practical resources?

A. Yes, the report includes a study guide designed to facilitate group discussions and theological reflection within congregations and study groups. The goal is to help communities understand and address Christian nationalism constructively.

Q. How can I access the report?

A. The report is available for purchase through:

- [Church Publishing Incorporated](#) (official publisher)
- Major online and local booksellers should have electronic and hard copies available.

Q. Are there additional resources related to the report?

A. Yes, additional resources include:

- A webinar titled "Essential Conversations: The Sin of Christian Nationalism" featuring scholars and bishops discussing the report's findings.
- Related articles and essays on the topic, are available through Episcopal News Service and diocesan websites.

Q. What does the Church hope to achieve with this report?

A. The Episcopal Church aims to:

- Educate Christians about the dangers of Christian nationalism.
- Promote the theological and moral rejection of exclusionary ideologies.
- Encourage Episcopalians to affirm the inclusive, justice-oriented teachings of Jesus Christ.
- Strengthen democracy and equality by challenging harmful distortions of religion.



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