

# Compelled to speak the truth

by Donald B. Kraybill

I stumbled across a reference to **Christian nationalism** in mid-July 2022. I had never seen the phrase before. It intrigued me. So, I took a deep research dive into Christian nationalism.

Three months later, our Elizabethtown (Pa.) Church of the Brethren in western Lancaster County placed a full-page color ad, “The Perils of Christian Nationalism,” in the *Lancaster Sunday News*. In nearly 50 emails, calls, and public letters, people applauded the statement.

We received numerous requests to post it in other newspapers, churches, and media, and in some cases to adapt it. A Catholic prayer group in Idaho asked permission to place the statement in their local newspaper. Brethren justice advocates in the Roanoke and the New River valleys of Virginia adapted it for publication in the *Roanoke Times*. A German journalist, writing a story on the midterm

elections in the US, linked to the statement on the Church of the Brethren Newline.

## So how did this story unfold?

Exploring Christian nationalism energized me—so much so that I taught a four-week faith formation class at the Elizabethtown church titled “Christian Nationalism: What It Is and Why It Matters.” The class attracted 60 to 70 people each Sunday, including visitors from other congregations.

Lancaster Interchurch Peace Witness is a network of peace proponents (pastors and lay members) in our area. In mid-August, the group organized a well-attended lecture, “The Dangers of Christian Nationalism,” taught by a professor at Lancaster Theological Seminary. A few members of our congregation attended the lecture, which inspired them to act.

The following Sunday, a handful of

members approached me following our worship service. One of them said, “Why don’t we put a statement about Christian nationalism in the Lancaster paper?” Our congregation had posted occasional public statements over the years. One, for example, protested the American invasion of Iraq, and a recent one testified against racism. With that DNA in our history, it only took a few minutes to get started. The chair of our witness commission enthusiastically supported the project. One member offered some financial support. And I agreed to draft a few lines of text.

Fortunately, Lancaster Interchurch Peace Witness supported and endorsed the ad. This demonstrated that worries about Christian nationalism spread much further than our congregation. Even though we had no references to politics or voting in the statement, we wanted to publish it at least two weeks before the midterm

“ Instead of speaking harshly and condemning adherents of Christian nationalism, we spoke graciously. ”



# ELIZABETHTOWN CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN

PRACTICING PEACE, SERVICE AND OPENNESS TO ALL

## The Perils of Christian Nationalism

"Our Christian faith is too expansive to be defined by any national identity—even a nation as beloved as America—and our embrace of American values of equality and inclusion are too profound to privilege any religion, even one as beloved as Christianity."

— Bishop W. Darin Moore, Presiding Prelate, Mid-Atlantic Episcopal District of the AME Zion Church

"Christian nationalism is the single biggest threat to religious freedom in America."

— Amanda Tyler, Executive Director, Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Freedom

**America's Promise: Freedom of Religion**  
The founders ensured our freedom of religion in the First Amendment of the Constitution. They declared that our government cannot establish a religion, and that every religion can be freely exercised (practiced). The First Amendment says that all religions are equal; the government has no favorites. Regardless of where people worship—in a cathedral, mosque, synagogue, church or temple—all religions enjoy the same status and protection in the eyes of the government.

**Christian Nationalism** is a movement whose followers advocate a particular brand of Christianity, which they believe is superior to other religions.

### Key Beliefs of Christian Nationalists

- America is God's chosen nation.
- America was established as a Christian nation.
- Christianity is woven into the fabric of America.
- Governments should make laws to keep America Christian.
- Christianity should be privileged above other religions.
- Christian symbols should be dominant in public places.

A small minority of Christians, mostly white, hold these beliefs. Some of them decry the waning influence of their views of Christianity in American life and what they see as the increasing persecution of Christians. And some fear being outnumbered by non-white people. Christian nationalism gives extremist groups a license for bigotry and violence. Some politicians exploit its sentiments for political gain. And for others, it is a strong heartfelt conviction.

### Transforming and Fighting

Christian nationalists want to transform society by infusing their values and policies into all levels of government. This vision energizes some politicians, who believe they are called—even anointed by God—to promote Christian nationalism. They say that the separation of church and state is an old myth. In their mind, church and state blend together.

Christian nationalists have a crusading mentality. Believing that God is by their side, they feel empowered to fight a cosmic battle between Good and Evil. This sense of Christian superiority may incite some to use violence in the name of God.

### Christian Nationalism Threatens Religious Freedom by

- Eroding the principle of the separation of church and state.
- Defying the First Amendment (establishment and free exercise clauses).
- Treating non-Christian religions and their members as second-class.
- Restricting the rights of non-Christian religions.
- Threatening to impose Christian nationalist policies on all U.S. citizens.
- Overturning America's promise of religious pluralism, justice, and equality.

### Which Jesus?

Christian nationalists prize power, domination, and exclusion. Their American-made Jesus is militant, hard nosed, and domineering. He's a Jesus who carries a sword and attacks his foes. This movement distorts the biblical Jesus and flips the core values of Christian faith upside down. The Jesus of the Gospels rejected nationalism. He refused to retaliate when beaten and nailed to a cross. He preached love for enemies. He blessed peacemakers and urged his followers to love their neighbors as their selves. He emphatically replaced domination with service to others. Jesus invited everyone to love their Jews and non-Jews, prostitutes and tax collectors, outcasts and religious leaders. All were welcome. Jesus established a global kingdom that goes beyond national boundaries. The God of Jesus has no favorite nation. His sun shines on the evil and the good; his rain falls on the just and unjust. So to whom do we pledge our allegiance? To the "Jesus" of Christian nationalism, or the Jesus of the Gospels?

### Protecting America's Promise

The cost of silence compels us to speak out. We deplore Christian nationalism. Our understanding of Jesus calls us to stand strong for the country we love and for the faith we cherish. We applaud America's promise to protect religious freedom—so that every faith is treated with dignity and equality.

Sponsored by the Elizabethtown Church of the Brethren <https://www.etowncob.org>,  
adopted by the congregation on October 9, 2022.  
Endorsed and supported by Lancaster Interchurch Peace Witness <https://lancasterinterchurchpeacewitness.org>

Resources:  
Statement by prominent national evangelist leaders: "Say 'No' to Christian Nationalism"  
Statement by Citizens Against Christian Nationalism: "Christians Against Christian Nationalism statement"  
Lecture by Professor Greg Carey, Lancaster Theological Seminary: "The Dangers of Christian Nationalism"



Lancaster Interchurch  
Peace Witness

election. Public discussions about Christian nationalism were already swirling in the media because Doug Mastriano, an exemplar of Christian nationalism, was a gubernatorial candidate in Pennsylvania.

The \$17,000 cost for a one-page color ad stunned us. We decided that private donors should pay the cost of the ad so it would not tax the church budget. The church board took the project to a special church council meeting. To the surprise of many, the 110 attendees unanimously approved the witness commission's recommendation. Three dozen donors contributed gifts ranging from \$25 to \$2,000. Private donations were a key to receiving the church council's support.

### **Our proclamation of the truth**

As we explored Christian nationalism, we became convinced that its beliefs distort the teachings of Jesus. The statement notes that Christian nationalism's American-made Jesus flips the values of the biblical Jesus upside down. In short, it's a false religion.

Christian nationalism's beliefs call

to mind the words of Jesus, "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves" (Matthew 7:15).

Why did we pay so much to place an ad in the newspaper? For two reasons. First, because we wanted to tell the truth. It was our witness, our proclamation of the truth. It was a public announcement: Here we stand. As we say in the statement, "The cost of silence compels us to speak out." Second, we did not expect to affect the voting or influence the outcome of the election, but we did hope to educate readers. We hoped to stir curiosity and spur conversation. Hundreds of anecdotes suggest that happened.

One of our church members faulted us for spending so much money on an ad. In his view, "We should be doing what Jesus taught us to do, helping the poor and needy." We reminded him that Jesus also taught us to tell the truth. Ironically, one of the email writers asked us rhetorically, "What would Jesus say about CN [Christian nationalism]? Exactly what you said. Thank you for saying it."

One dilemma we faced was how to

speak the truth to those with whom we disagree—the proponents of Christian nationalism. Instead of speaking harshly and condemning adherents of Christian nationalism, we spoke graciously. We didn't link them to the Jan. 6 insurrection at the US Capitol, nor did we claim that Christian nationalism was a threat to democracy. After explaining how politicians exploit Christian nationalism for political power and noting that Christian nationalism provides a license for bigotry and violence, we added this empathetic line, "... and for others, it is a strong heartfelt conviction." Moreover, we explained that God's sun shines on the good and the evil and that God's rain falls on the just and unjust (Matthew 5:45). We were careful not to vilify those with whom we disagree.

Several of our members said we were too gracious; we needed to explicitly reject Christian nationalism. So we inserted this sentence: "We deplore Christian nationalism." And to clarify that we weren't anti-American flag burners, we concluded the ad with these words: "Our understanding of Jesus calls us to stand strong for the country we love and for the faith we cherish."

Finally, the project reminded us, as members of the congregation, who we are and what we stand for. 

Donald B. Kraybill, a member of Elizabethtown Church of the Brethren, helped to organize the project and craft the statement. He is senior fellow emeritus of the Young Center for Anabaptist and Pietist Studies at Elizabethtown College.

### **Keys to our success:**

- Strong support from lay leaders and pastors
- Visionary leadership from our witness commission
- A faith formation class that built support among our members
- Support and endorsement from Lancaster Interchurch Peace Witness
- Securing financial contributions from individual donors
- A socio-political climate that sensitized people to Christian nationalism and the midterm elections

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