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A Special Statement from the Editor of Christian Ethics Today: Moving Forward

By Patrick Anderson, editor

In the aftermath of the 2024 presidential election, I see three major realities that *Christian Ethics Today*, along with all like-minded publications and organizations, must continue to address.

First, White Christian Nationalism (WCN) did not begin with Donald Trump; he did not create a White Christian Nationalism phenomenon in America. We have contended with the ideology of WCN throughout our history. At each juncture in that history, theological (Christian) arguments have been offered to support policies and actions that run counter to the way of Jesus. Our founding fathers debated it and finally adopted the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, expressly rejecting the establishment of a state religion and forbidding any infringement on the freedom of religious expression.

Our struggle over slavery was dominated by White Christian arguments. Westward expansion and manifest destiny, both stemming from the “Christian” Doctrine of Discovery, were justified and encouraged by white Christian theology. The Jim Crow legacy of the 20th century was dominated by ideas of white supremacy, based in large part on faulty biblical interpretations regarding racial segregation and inequality. The Nazism and authoritarianism which led up to World War II, although widely supported by many American Christians, are experiencing a disturbing reemergence in this century. The desire for a strongman leader and Christian domination has plagued our country continuously. While Trump exposed and empowered the WCN ideology, it had existed long before his arrival on our political scene.

Second, we must recognize the fact that when Trump is no longer around, the ideology of WCN will persist. He has ignited a fire of bigotry and disassociation from the teachings of Jesus among a large number of Americans. This is especially obvious in the Republican Party. We must educate and equip people who will challenge, refute and resist that ideology.

Third, every social and moral issue we face is affected by WCN, including workers’ rights, reproductive rights, voting rights, LGBTQ+ rights,

the right for gender-affirming and trans-inclusive healthcare, the right to religious freedom, international leadership, health care, poverty, war, racial justice, affordable housing, immigration and economic justice, foreign policy, gender inequality—and the list goes on, including every aspect of personal morality and public righteousness. Indeed, the interconnectedness of social/moral issues and the faulty reliance on misinterpreted concepts of Christianity and unfettered capitalism undergird fascist’s core domineering ideology.

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Christian Ethics Today is committed to engage fully in the coming days, as we have from our beginning, to fulfill our mission statement which has consistently stated: *to provide laypersons, educators and ministers with a resource for understanding and responding in a faithful Christian manner to moral and ethical issues that are of concern to contemporary Christians, to the church, and to society.*

We will fervently continue to interpret and apply Christian experience, biblical truth, theological insights, historical understanding and current research to contemporary moral issues. ■

We Mourn the Loss of Tony Campolo and Celebrate His Life and Work

Tony Campolo passed from this life to the next on November 19, 2024. Readers of Christian Ethics Today and all other fellow progressive Christians grieve his loss and pray peace for Peggy and their children. Tony was a long-time member of the CET board of directors, an enthusiastic supporter, advocate and friend. His infectious laugh, full-faced smile and humble humor will remain in our memories eternally. He will be missed, even as his books, articles and famous sermons and lectures will continue to bless us. Rest in Peace, Tony. You are indeed a good and faithful servant to Jesus Christ.

Faith and Liberation Lessons: Consider Shiphrah and Puah

By Wendell Griffen

Exodus 1:8-21

⁸Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. ⁹He said to his people, “Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. ¹⁰Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land.”

¹¹Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh. ¹²But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites.

¹³The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, ¹⁴and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labor. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them.

¹⁵The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, ¹⁶“When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them on the birthstool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live.”

¹⁷But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live.

¹⁸So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, “Why have you done this, and allowed the boys to live?”

¹⁹The midwives said to Pharaoh, “Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them.”

²⁰So God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and became very strong.

²¹And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families.

One of the often-quoted passages from the writings of St. Paul is his perspective on the usefulness of Scripture – sacred writings. According to that apostle, “All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for

teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work” [2 Timothy 3:16, (NRSV)].

With that in mind, today I invite us to ponder the liberation narrative set out in the first chapter of Exodus, the second book in the Hebrew Testament. Some people – including more than a few preachers – view that passage as the back story to the life of Moses. However, the passage we ponder today is not about Moses. It is about the role of faithful midwives, led by two women named Shiphrah and Puah, in civil disobedience to the ruthless oppression of an immigrant population by an ancient empire. That is why today’s sermon is titled *Faith and Liberation Lessons*.

According to Exodus, an imperial ruler became afraid that a population of immigrants would eventually outnumber his society or side with enemies of his society and take over. The ruler tried to work the immigrant population into submission, apparently believing that the workers would be too exhausted to procreate. But the empire could not work the immigrants long enough and hard enough to prevent them from having children. According to the narrative, the harder and longer the immigrants were subjected to oppressive labor practices, the more they reproduced.

So, the fearful ruler decided to control the immigrant population by ordering immigrant midwives to murder newborn male babies. On top of oppressive labor practices, the ruler resorted to state-sanctioned murder of newborn baby boys. The ruler wanted immigrant midwives to murder the baby boys born as immigrant mothers were exhausted from labor and delivery and when immigrant fathers would be unable to protect the mothers and the babies. The ruler wanted to turn midwives into assassins.

But the immigrant midwives refused to cooperate. Led by Shiphrah and Puah, they became what might be termed the first “Underground Railroad” ministry in Scripture. Led by Shiphrah and Puah, immigrant midwives carried out a liberation movement against an empire and its ruthless leader. Without military protection, voting rights or financial backers, immigrant midwives challenged an empire for one reason: They revered God.

Because they revered God, Shiprah and Puah led immigrant midwives to disobey governmental orders and become revolutionaries.

Because they revered God, Shiprah and Puah led immigrant midwives to become subversive agents of a radical revolution.

Because they revered God, Shiprah and Puah led immigrant midwives to protect helpless families from an imperial scheme of terrorism and immigrant depopulation.

Because they revered God, Shiprah and Puah led immigrant midwives to lead immigrant families to protect newborn baby boys.

Shiprah, Puah and the other immigrant midwives were women who led a peaceful revolution against imperial oppression and tyranny. They were women who lied to male authority figures. They were women who defied male mandates. They were women who refused to have male notions of dominance dictate their morality and pervert their ethics.

My dear brother and our friend, Dr. Allan Boesak of South Africa, is right. Women, and specifically midwives, led by Shiprah and Puah, led the first civil rights movement in the Bible. Women, not men, and certainly not male preachers, priests, or prophets, were inspired to help other women protect helpless baby boys from murderous male schemes for domination and extermination.

Let me make it plain. This passage teaches that God does inspire, equip and send women to lead movements. Despite what some preachers think, despite what some religious bodies believe, and despite what many people – men and women – say and believe, God inspires, equips and sends women to lead liberation movements.

- The women in this passage were the best politicians
- The women in this passage were the prophets.
- The women in this passage were the organizers.
- The women in this passage were the liberators.

And the women did those things because they revered God. They loved God more than imperial favor. They loved vulnerable people more than whatever imperial perks they might have been offered or might have enjoyed. They loved vulnerable people more than even their own lives. They protected pregnant women in the throes of childbirth and saved their newborn baby boys, even when they could have been punished for doing so.

Today is the first Sunday following the 2024 U.S.

presidential election. By a clear majority of the popular vote and the electoral college, voters in the United States decided to re-hire Donald Trump as president and hired J.D. Vance as vice president for the next four years. As pastor of this congregation and as a citizen of the United States, I accept their election.

Yet, as pastor of this congregation, I have a moral duty before God and to this congregation to address the moral and ethical realities and foreseeable implications of the 2024 presidential election. I did so three days ago in a post on my personal blog titled *Truth, Consequences and A Response to the 2024 Election* which has been republished by the Arkansas Times, Good Faith Media and Today's Communique (the online information platform published by Kenya Eddings of Little Rock).

This sermon is inspired by that election outcome. In the name of God, I contend that we need the reverent faithfulness and prophetic courage of Shiprah and Puah in the wake of the 2024 election.

Shiprah and Puah could not overthrow the Egyptian ruler who ordered immigrant midwives to terrorize

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immigrant families and murder immigrant baby boys. But they could, and did, prevent the ruler from killing those babies. They could, and did, refuse to follow evil orders. They could do it, and did it, because they revered God enough, loved God's people enough, and were committed to righteousness/justice that much.

Do we revere God that much? Do we love God's people that much? Are we committed to righteousness/justice that much?

Or will we be 21st century versions of the empire that was led by a ruler who was such a vicious sociopath that he wanted to separate newborn baby boys from their families and people by killing them? Will

we be 21st century versions of an empire that was led by a ruler who drafted midwives to assassinate newborn babies because they were born to immigrant parents?

As a follower of Jesus and as your pastor, I owe it to God to challenge us to ponder the 2024 election results from this perspective. As pastor of this congregation, I owe it to God to encourage each of us – and especially women and girls – to follow the prophetic example and leadership shown by Shiprah, Puah and the other immigrant midwives we read about in Exodus 1. God does inspire, equip and dispatch women as religious, social, political and cultural leaders.

I owe it to God to challenge each of us – and especially men and boys – to reject the myth of male superiority and domination over women exposed in Exodus 1. This passage shows that men and boys are **not** ordained by God to exercise control over the reproductive choices of women and girls. That idea is not divinely inspired. It is diabolical.

God challenges us to analyze the U.S. society and the coming Trump-Vance administration in the light of this passage and the rest of Scripture. Across its history, the United States has been determined to be an empire. It began as a slave-holding, woman-dominating, and land-stealing, nation that deliberately committed genocide against indigenous people. From its beginning until now, this society has oppressed workers and mistreated immigrants of color.

And across its history, religious people in the United States have refused to follow the examples of Shiprah, Puah and the other immigrant midwives. Instead, religious people have praised, courted and counseled rulers who engaged in the same kind of murderous and misogynous treatment illustrated in Exodus 1, and are poised to continue doing so, boldly, for the Trump-Vance administration.

As your pastor, I owe it to God to say that we should not follow 21st century versions of the kind of religious people who praised, courted and counseled the imperial ruler in Exodus 1. And we owe it to God to protect our vulnerable neighbors who will be oppressed by vicious, unjust and hateful political policies and practices of the Trump-Vance administration.

Let me make it plain. The newborn baby boys in Exodus 1 were “undocumented immigrants.” Shiprah, Puah and the other midwives were drafted by the political leader of Egypt to be agents of a mass deportation program. They refused to go along with it. They schemed to undermine it and frustrate it.

Shiprah, Puah and the other midwives lied, plotted

and concealed what they were doing from the vicious, unjust and hateful political ruler who was determined to terrorize immigrant families by controlling the reproductive choices of immigrant women and families. Do we revere God and love our neighbors that much? Are we enough in step with the Spirit of God to realize that this is our moral and ethical duty?

Beyond that, are the preachers of our time smart enough and brave enough to warn the rulers of our time that it is foolish and ultimately futile to outlaw God’s love and justice? The ruler in Exodus 1 controlled the entire government. He controlled the military, financial system and political system. Shiprah, Puah, the other midwives and the immigrant population they served knew they were no match for the Egyptian ruler and his cronies. But they believed that the Egyptian ruler and his cronies were no match for God!

You and I have the moral and ethical duty inspired by this Scripture, and by the life and teachings of Jesus, to confront the rulers of our time and place. Do we have the courage to say to the rulers of our time and place that they are no match for the God of love and justice?

We are in a crucial moment for countless vulnerable people in this society and across the world. Let us join Shiprah, Puah the other midwives, women, men and children of faith across the ages as followers of Jesus who scheme, plot and act to frustrate imperial oppression, terror, and other wickedness.

This is our duty before God. This is our time to do this work because we revere God. This is our “willing sacrifice” in obedience to the Spirit of God. This is how we will be agents of liberation to the glory of God. Amen. ■

Wendell Griffen is author of The Fierce Urgency of Prophetic Hope (Judson Press, 2017) and, with Allan Boesak, Parable, Politics, and Prophetic Faith (Nurturing Faith, 2023). He is retired from the judgeship in Arkansas and is pastor, New Millennium Church, Little Rock, Arkansas. He is CEO, Griffen Strategic Consulting, Co-Chair, Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference, member of the Board of Directors of Christian Ethics Today and is widely read in numerous publications such as Baptist News Global, Nurturing Faith, through his blog published on Today’s Communique. This sermon was preached on November 10, 2024, at the New Millennium Church in Little Rock, Arkansas and was granted for reprint in Christian Ethics Today.

Resisting Christian Nationalism and Cultivating Compassion in Immokalee

By Rick Burnette

During the earliest days of his ministry, Jesus seemed to blow an opportunity to make a good impression with the folks back home in Nazareth. Invited to participate while attending synagogue on the Sabbath, he took the scroll of Isaiah and read:

*“The Spirit of the Lord is on Me,
because He has anointed Me
to preach good news to the poor.
He has sent Me to proclaim liberty to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to release the oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”*

Finishing the passage, Jesus announced, “Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”

So far, so good with the congregants. But then he brings an unexpected twist to Isaiah’s passage of good news for the poor, liberty for the captives, recovery of sight for the blind, and release for the oppressed. Using only three sentences to recount how Elijah and Elisha brought God’s provision and healing to Gentiles, Jesus communicated to the people of Nazareth—his own people—that the fulfillment of Isaiah’s passage is not merely limited to their tribe.

The Nazarenes were not ready for that message. In fact, they were so mad that they tried to throw their native son over a cliff. Somehow, Jesus managed to slip away.

In *We Make the Road by Walking*, Brian McLaren explains that when the home crowd realized that Jesus was saying that the good news wasn’t just for them, but for all humankind, they felt betrayed and viewed Jesus as disloyal.

Sound familiar?

Our churches are in a tight spot right now as societal tensions have amplified the us-vs.-them mentality. To court favor among the native-born during these uncertain times, immigrants are being criminalized and dehumanized for political purposes. Consequently, congregants may not be on the same page regarding this matter.

Meanwhile, we may not have noticed that the world is on fire. Climate change does not operate in a vacuum; it ripples, spawning crop failure, homelessness, civil unrest, stalled economies, toxic politics and war. It’s all connected, resulting in the displacement of mil-

lions worldwide.

We seem to forget that humans have always been on the move. But with increasing global turmoil, the volume of the displaced continues to grow, with more and more people desperate for security, shelter and full stomachs.

During a recent gathering of Global Missions field personnel, it was observed that most of us are now engaged in ministries related to global migration—right when migration has become a political dirty word. But as people of the Word, we are not ignoring the Biblical mandate to welcome the stranger, love our neighbor, and feed His sheep.

Our ministry, Cultivate Abundance, serves the

The political effects of Christian nationalism reinforce inequality and the chronic lack of access to essential resources for and by the poor, resulting in inadequate food, pay, health care and housing as well as insecure legal status.

Immokalee farmworker community of southwest Florida. Despite being isolated, Immokalee isn’t tiny. This un-incorporated community has a population of roughly 26,000, largely comprised of people with roots in Mexico, Guatemala and Haiti, with mixed residency status.

Immokalee is where most of America’s tomatoes, and other commercial produce, are grown during the winter. Despite approximately 16 million pounds of food leaving Immokalee each day, much of the community has been classified as a food desert—neighborhoods where quality, affordable food is difficult to access.

The core mission of Cultivate Abundance and our main partner, Misión Peniel, is to honor our hardworking, food insecure, immigrant neighbors by growing, collecting and sharing nutritious food of cultural preference. But in the process, we have found ourselves confronting hostility as immigrant-rich communities,

such as Immokalee, are in the crosshairs of hostile Christian nationalism.

Recent news has detailed how immigrant populations in places such as Springfield, Ohio, and Sylacauga, Alabama, are being targeted by conspiracy theories and racist hate, all fanned by the White nationalist political agenda.

Defined by Christians Against Christian Nationalism as “a cultural framework that idealizes and advocates a fusion of Christianity with American civic life,” Americans who embrace Christian nationalism are more likely to believe racial inequality is a result of the personal shortcomings of minority groups. They also fear refugees and hold anti-immigrant views (What is Christian Nationalism? ChristiansAgainstChristianNationalism.org).

The political effects of Christian nationalism reinforce inequality and the chronic lack of access to essential resources for and by the poor, resulting in inadequate food, pay, health care and housing as well as insecure legal status. Such conditions are rampant in Immokalee.

One way Misión Peniel and Cultivate Abundance stand up to Christian nationalism is to work in solidarity with local organizations, including UNIDOS and the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW), who represent immigrant farmworker interests.

In 2023, the Florida governor signed a controversial anti-immigrant bill into law. Among other things, the law criminalizes traveling across state lines with undocumented people, invalidates out-of-state licenses issued to undocumented immigrants, requires hospitals to inquire about immigration status, bars DACA recipients from practicing law, and expels migrants outside of Florida (ACLU Florida, What Does Florida’s SB 1718 Do? <https://www.aclufl.org/en/what-does-sb1718-do>).

Just after the law was passed and signed, Cultivate Abundance and Misión Peniel team members involved with UNIDOS and CIW organized and implemented a peaceful march. Thousands of locals and their allies participated to protest the anti-immigrant legislation. In addition to raising our voices against unjust governmental policies that ultimately harm immigrant communities, we have pushed back against the attempted intrusion of organized Christian nationalism.

Deeply conservative and home to very affluent coastal communities, southwest Florida is a hotbed of Christian nationalism. A vastly influential farm and business owner played a key role in organizing and transporting locals to take part in the January 6 effort to disrupt the convening of the U.S. Congress to count the electoral votes of the 2020 presidential elec-

tion. Among them, was a Naples man who was later arrested for assaulting law enforcement among other charges.

In late 2022, a prominent Naples resident invited me to introduce our ministry to a small group led by his Episcopal priest. They had learned about Cultivate Abundance from a Ft. Myers-based evangelical non-profit and wanted to see how we might collaborate to offer community gardening among farmworkers.

A few weeks later, I was introduced to approximately 10 people, including the priest, at a trendy Naples Mexican restaurant. I learned that most of them attended a nearby evangelical church. While digging into my chili relleno, I listened in on their conversations.

At one point I heard the priest refer to some nonprofits that work with “illegals.” The evils of COVID-19 vaccines were also discussed as well as an upcoming meeting that would feature the January 6 organizer. I gathered that they were preparing to demand that the county commissioners reject a 1.2-million-dollar CDC grant intended to benefit Immokalee’s farmworker population.

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They also began to demonize our Immokalee non-profit allies, the Healthcare Network and Partners in Health (PIH). These reputable organizations had been selected to apply the grant towards assisting farmworkers with healthcare education related to diabetes, heart disease, the COVID-19 vaccine and flu. By the time I finished my meal, I had no doubt that I had somehow stumbled into a hornets’ nest of Christian nationalists.

At that point I informed them that our team works closely with the Healthcare Network and PIH and appreciate what they do. My hosts blinked. They had assumed that I was one of them—obviously White, probably conservative and evangelical. Despite my pushback, they insisted on visiting our work in Immokalee. Weakly, I gave them a vague answer about getting back in touch, hoping they’d realize that we aren’t their cup of tea.

Feeling sick, I returned to Misión Peniel to share about my interaction with this group. Should we allow them to visit? Perhaps we can help open their eyes. My colleagues were adamant about rejecting their visit. As long-time residents of Immokalee and other

immigrant communities, they had already experienced racist trauma and had a better understanding than I that these wealthy people, with their anti-CDC bias, held the cards. No good would come from their visit.

The most prominent, wealthiest member of the group would continue to contact me frequently to offer plants and containers. I once picked up some of the trifling donations at his impressive farm to keep him away from Misión Peniel. Perhaps he was simply naïve in his intentions to help. But quite soon I ended all contact because of harmful actions committed by his associates the following month.

I would soon learn that those I had met at the Mexican restaurant were active in a local Medical Freedom group. Under the guise of protecting the Immokalee farmworker community from vaccines, during a venomous February 2023 public meeting, they browbeat the Collier County Commission into rejecting the CDC grant. They ultimately deprived the farmworkers of much-needed public health assistance while spewing hate about various reputable agencies serving the community. Obviously, they had no intention of helping. They only wanted to interfere.

Excluding those who pose a threat is not a preferable activity. Done poorly, efforts to protect are paternalistic. Whether from an individual or organizational standpoint, we are all complex blends of positive and negative elements. Those seeking to make sense of the world will face a barrage of political, cultural and religious influence, especially when delivered through social media.

Regarding the hot topic of immigration, I encounter many who are unsure what to believe. Why do immigrants come here? And are they a threat?

Because Cultivate Abundance and Misión Peniel depend on volunteer assistance, we engage with many from predominately White church communities outside of Immokalee. This is an opportunity to widen perspectives while mitigating fear and prejudice – the roots of Christian nationalism - as volunteers interact with members of the farmworker community.

One might think that Christian nationalism is mainly an evangelical issue. However, the Medical Freedom group included Episcopalians. Having been involved in a local mainline Presbyterian congregation that offered strong support to the work of Misión Peniel and Cultivate Abundance, I was once challenged by a church elder who stated concerns that we would bring diseases back to the church from Immokalee.

Among CBF congregations, as I share about our work, I sense an overall positive vibe. However, it's not unusual for someone to question the legal status of those we serve.

By inviting church-based volunteers from PCUSA and CBF congregations, as well as other vetted groups, to work alongside us in Immokalee, helpful conversations are inevitable. I hear from supportive church contacts that such engagement and immersion is helping to move the needle from mistrust to greater understanding and compassion for the immigrant community.

Additionally, we ask visiting teams not to limit their interest and concern to Immokalee. Our community isn't the only location where immigrant workers are engaged in vital services. Practically every locale is being enriched through the diversity and skillsets of those who harvest, process and prepare our food as well as those who construct our homes, care for the sick and elderly, and keep industries going, usually with minimal compensation. Therefore, our hope is that all visitors and volunteers will go home to nurture awareness and further positive interactions with their immigrant neighbors.

With the winner of the 2024 presidential election having promised mass deportations, we expect the

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economy of Immokalee and other immigrant-dependent communities to be shattered. We also anticipate that the next farm bill will be severely deflated, offering even less food assistance than before.

Considering these circumstances, the need to address local food insecurity will be heightened. We will stand alongside our beleaguered immigrant neighbors and continue to help inform and nurture the involvement of future allies to overcome ignorance and vitriol. ■

Rick Burnette and his wife, Ellen, have lived among and served poor, disadvantaged people in South Asia, Florida and elsewhere. They lead Cultivate Abundance, and Rick is also a senior role model in Global Missions at the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

How Zionism Poisoned Western Christianity

By Jack Nassar

As a Semitic Palestinian Christian, I am deeply troubled by the pernicious influence of Zionist ideology on Western Christian theology.

This ideology has ensnared many Western Christians, who cynically leverage the suffering of the Jewish people, especially during the Holocaust, to justify the ongoing oppression of Palestinians, including Palestinian Christians persecuted by the Israeli government, its occupation and settlers.

Despite the fact that Palestinians are not their enemies, Zionist Christians shamefully neglect Christ's command to "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." The infiltration of Zionist ideology, particularly within evangelical, Pentecostal, Baptist and charismatic churches in the United States, has profoundly compromised the integrity of our Christian faith.

Jesus taught inclusion

Jesus Christ, a Palestinian Jew, taught radical inclusion, compassion for the marginalized and resistance against earthly powers. Yet today, Christian Zionism distorts these sacred teachings, replacing them with toxic nationalism, militarism and racial superiority. By twisting Scripture and history to fit political ends, Zionism not only corrupts our faith but also endangers Christians in the Middle East and beyond.

At the heart of this crisis lies a profound contradiction: Zionism's ethnic nationalism clashes with the universal, inclusive kingdom of God revealed in the New Testament. The Apostle Paul writes in Galatians 6:15 that "what counts is the new creation," emphasizing faith over ethnic identity.

Yet Zionism promotes a divisive view of God's chosen people based on lineage, undermining the unity we find in Christ. Paul reminds us in Galatians 3, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise." This biblical truth challenges the exclusivist claims of Zionist ideology, which foster division among believers.

Blessings through faith

Moreover, the promise to Abraham in Genesis 12:3, "I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses

you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you," is often misused to justify political policies that oppress Palestinians. This promise, made to Abraham about 4,000 years ago, was never intended to validate the establishment of the modern state of Israel in 1948 at the expense of Palestinians. It speaks of blessings through faith, not through political maneuvering, military might or ethnicity.

Zionism's distortion of God's work is particularly troubling. By equating violence, colonization and discrimination with divine will, Zionism leads Christians away from the teachings of Christ, who commanded us to love one another and seek peace. This false theology not only misrepresents our faith but also undermines efforts for justice and reconciliation worldwide. Jesus' message of compassion and justice, as exemplified in

By twisting Scripture and history to fit political ends, Zionism not only corrupts our faith but also endangers Christians in the Middle East and beyond.

Isaiah 1:17, calls us to "seek justice, correct oppression, defend the fatherless, and plead the widow's cause." Instead, Zionism often perpetuates oppression and inequality in the name of divine sanction.

By promoting conflict through advocating for policies that unconditionally support Israel's territorial expansion and racial supremacy, Christian Zionism has funded and contributed to ongoing conflicts, hatred and violence not just in the Middle East, but around the globe. It has done so especially by demonizing, dehumanizing and spreading propaganda and stereotypes against Arabs, Iranians, Chinese, Russians, Africans, Latinos, Palestinians, Eastern Christians, Muslims and, in many cases, Jewish people.

Zionism beguiles Christians

The stark contradiction between Zionist ideologies and the gospel message of love and reconciliation demands a profound reckoning within the Christian community. Zionism beguiles countless souls by casting the modern state of Israel as the fulfillment of biblical prophecy, eclipsing the spiritual renewal ignited

by the church at Pentecost.

Our allegiance must pivot back to the eternal spiritual realm, resisting the allure of political expediency that clouds our discernment.

Jesus' teachings often focused on the kingdom of God as a spiritual realm rather than a political or territorial entity, as stated in Luke 17: "Being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, he answered them, 'The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed, nor will they say, "Look, here it is!" or "There!" for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you.'"

The new covenant in Christ is not merely a continuation but a fulfillment and transformation of the old covenants, fundamentally altering their meaning. Hebrews 8:6-13 underscores this by declaring the old covenant obsolete, while Jeremiah 31:31-34 prophesies the establishment of this new covenant. This transformation implies that the land promises to Israel are reinterpreted and fulfilled in Christ.

Christian eschatology emphasizes the return of Christ and the ultimate establishment of God's kingdom, focusing on a renewed creation rather than a specific political state. Revelation 21:1-4 vividly depicts the New Jerusalem descending from heaven, symbolizing the culmination of God's redemptive plan and highlighting the spiritual, rather than territorial, nature of God's kingdom.

Roots of Zionism

The roots of this distortion are very recent, tracing back to the 19th century when Christian Restorationism movements began advocating for the return of the Jewish people to the "Promised Land." This laid the groundwork for the creation of the state of Israel in 1948, which was accompanied by the systematic dispossession and ethnic cleansing of the indigenous Palestinian population — a violent act Christians have a moral obligation to condemn, not celebrate.

Furthermore, Zionism's entanglement with economic interests often leads to exploitation and oppression, contradicting the principles of justice and fairness advocated by Christianity. Zionism's disregard for the rights and dignity of the indigenous Semitic Palestinian people, including Palestinian Christians who have inhabited the land for thousands of years and as Christians for more than 2,000 continuous years, betrays the Christian call for justice and compassion.

The Bible's repeated warnings against the love of money and the pursuit of material gain at the expense of justice and mercy underscore the theological problems with Zionism's complicity in the exploitation of

Palestinian resources and labor, prioritizing profit over human dignity and the common good.

Six-pointed star

Zionism has led Christians to revere the six-pointed star as a divine symbol, despite the Bible condemning it as the "star of Rephan," a symbol of pagan idolatry (Acts 7:43). This dangerous shift from spiritual truth to political allegiance severely obscures discernment. Elevating this symbol above the Cross as a sign of God's favor fundamentally undermines the centrality of Christ and the gospel.

The Bible's denunciation of the six-pointed star as the "star of Rephan" starkly illustrates how this misalignment erodes the message of salvation through Jesus' sacrifice. By substituting spiritual truth with political symbolism, this shift deepens the theological crisis, betraying the core tenets of Christianity.

Today, the influence of Christian Zionism is pervasive, with many megachurch pastors, politicians and evangelical leaders unquestioningly promoting the interests of the Israeli government, even when those

Today, the influence of Christian Zionism is pervasive, with many megachurch pastors, politicians and evangelical leaders unquestioningly promoting the interests of the Israeli government, even when those interests flagrantly contradict the gospel message, harm Palestinian Christians or run counter to Jewish teachings.

interests flagrantly contradict the gospel message, harm Palestinian Christians or run counter to Jewish teachings. This has emboldened the most extreme, hawkish elements within Israeli society, contributing to the ongoing occupation, apartheid, displacement, settlement expansion and blatant disregard for Palestinian human rights, thereby neglecting the plight of the Palestinian church.

The infiltration of Zionist ideology into Western Christianity poses a grave threat to the purity and integrity of our faith. By prioritizing partisan political agendas and economic interests over the radical, universalist teachings of Christ, Christian Zionism has gravely undermined the church's ability to be a force for reconciliation, justice and lasting peace in the Middle East and the world at large.

As expressed in the words of the prophet Isaiah: “Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow” (Isaiah 1:17).

Jesus’ rejection of earthly political power stands in stark contrast to the political emphasis often found in Christian Zionism. In John 18:36, Jesus said, “My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world.”

This profound statement underscores the spiritual nature of Christ’s mission, yet Christian Zionism often distorts this message for political purposes. John Hagee, founder of “Christians United for Israel,” the largest Christian Zionist organization with about 10 million followers, exercises immense influence. He frequently misuses Scripture to advance political agendas and sow division, even steering his followers to prioritize allegiance to Israel over devotion to Jesus. If you see an Israeli flag in your church, it might be time to seek a place of worship that keeps Christ at its center.

Time for a reckoning

It is time for Western Christians to engage in a profound reckoning — rejecting the false idols of nationalist Zionism and reclaiming the essence of our Christian heritage. This calls for genuine solidarity with our Semitic Palestinian Christian brethren and the

Jewish people alike while condemning the systematic dispossession and oppression of Palestinians.

It requires envisioning a Holy Land grounded in love, compassion and nonviolent resistance. It is about honoring Judaism’s spiritual legacy and the invaluable contributions of Jewish people to our faith and humanity. Moreover, it involves standing united with Arabs, Palestinians, Israelis, Jews, Christians and Muslims in the pursuit of justice and peace.

Only then can we begin to heal the historic divide between Western Christianity, Judaism and the Palestinian people, fulfilling our mandate as catalysts for reconciliation, justice and enduring peace. ■

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What America's History Can Teach Us about Debates on Religious Freedom and Its Importance for Democracy

By Corey Walker

Supporters of both major U.S. political parties tend to claim their presidential candidate is the “real” Christian or the “better” Christian or just the “true” Christian.

For a majority of white evangelical Protestants, Trump is the good Christian. Christians for Kamala, a newly-created group of self-identified Christians who support the Democratic nominee, say that her campaign embodies the “compassionate heart of Jesus and his teachings.”

Yet, most American adults agree that religion should be separate from government. This widely shared belief is a cornerstone of religious freedom. As a scholar of religious freedom, I have studied the complex and ever-evolving role of religion in American politics. I argue that this election year, while the Christian character of each candidate is discussed everywhere, religious freedom, one of the core freedoms of American democracy, is not.

The case of Ezra Stiles Ely

America's history of religious freedom is filled with stories that are instructive for our current moment. One such instructive lesson comes from the early 19th century.

The Second Great Awakening was an intense period of religious revival. Evangelical Christians sought to reform American law and politics to reflect what they considered to be true Christianity. According to legal scholar Geoffrey R. Stone, it was at this time the claim that the “United States is a ‘Christian nation’ first seriously took root.”

A striking figure from the period is the Philadelphia Presbyterian minister Ezra Stiles Ely. On July 4, 1827, the Yale-educated minister delivered his infamous call for “a Christian political party” in the run-up to the 1828 presidential election.

Ely's oration, *The Duty of Christian Freemen to Elect Christian Rulers*, was a 19th-century version of what is today called “Christian nationalism.” In it, Ely laid out his view of a distinctly Christian vision of who should serve as political leaders and how they should govern.

Before an Independence Day audience in Philadelphia's Seventh Presbyterian Church, Ely declared, “Every ruler should be an avowed and sincere friend of Christianity. He should know and believe the doctrines of our holy religion, and act in conformity to its precepts.” Ely also advocated for “a new sort of union, or, if you will, a Christian party in politics.”

Ely closed his sermon by exhorting Christians to “awake ... to our sacred duty to our Divine Master; and let us have no rulers, without our consent and

Ely's oration, The Duty of Christian Freemen to Elect Christian Rulers, was a 19th-century version of what is today called “Christian nationalism.”

cooperation, who are not known to be avowedly Christians.”

Critiques in defense of religious freedom

While Ely sought to wed Christianity and American politics, others voices responded against this move. Religious freedom was new for the young nation. Yet, its supporters recognized its importance for American democracy.

On Feb. 7, 1828, a pamphlet titled *Sunday School Union, or Union of Church and State*, was placed on the desk of each member of the Pennsylvania senate. The pamphlet contained excerpts of Ely's speech that advocated the union of Christianity and politics. Ely's speech was also the subject of debate in several 19th-century newspapers, including the and the *Pennsylvania Reporter*.

Notable among these voices was Massachusetts-born and Harvard-educated Supreme Court Justice Joseph Story.

In an 1828 speech delivered in Salem, Massachusetts, Story boldly declared his support for

religious freedom. He stated: “Religious freedom is the birthright of man; that governments have no authority to inflict punishment for conscientious differences of opinion; and that to worship God according to our own belief is not only our privilege, but is our duty, our absolute duty, from which no human tribunal can absolve us.

“Wherever religious liberty exists,” he argued, “it will, first or last, bring in, and establish political liberty.”

Politics and American democracy

America is not the same as at the time of the Second Great Awakening. Yet, the role of Christianity in political life is seemingly as alive as ever.

The steady decline in church attendance has not resulted in a diminished Christian presence in American public life. The public square still contains powerful appeals to Christianity rather than a shared democratic heritage.

The newly-elected Donald Trump recently stated, “We have to bring back our religion. We have to bring back Christianity in this country.”

Supreme Court Justice Samuel Alito has commended the religious convictions of citizens, stating, “People with deep religious convictions may be less likely to succumb to dominating ideologies or trends, and more likely to act in accordance with what they see as true and right. Civil society can count on them as engines of reform.”

A 2023 survey, in which the nonprofit, nonpartisan research and education organization PRRI interviewed more than 22,000 adults, found that approximately three in 10 Americans either supported or held

Christian nationalist views. Christian nationalists tend “to see political struggles through the apocalyptic lens of revolution and to support political violence.”

In my opinion, the linkage of Christianity and politics in the United States undermines American democracy. Amanda Tyler, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, a prominent public voice, explains how Christian nationalism undermines both Christianity and American democracy. In her 2024 book *How to End Christian Nationalism*, Tyler writes, “Christian nationalism is the greatest threat to religious liberty in the U.S. today, as well as a clear and present danger to our constitutional republic.”

While debates over the Christian virtues of the candidates may be important for Christian communities, religious freedom is important for American democracy. The response to Christianity and politics is not more Christianity but more democracy. And religious freedom is key. ■

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The faithful gifts of friends and readers, and the support of the Eula Mae and John Baugh Foundation, enable us to provide the journal to anyone wishing to receive it. If you wish for us to send the journal to someone, please let us know.

Americans Use the Book of Revelation to Talk about Immigration – and Always Have

By Yii-Jan Lin

During a campaign speech in Latrobe, Pennsylvania, on Oct. 19, 2024, Donald Trump promised to save the country from immigrants: “I will rescue every town across America that has been invaded and conquered, and we will put these vicious and bloodthirsty criminals in a jail or kick them out of our country.”

Depicting immigrants as a threat has been a pillar of Trump’s message since 2015. And the types of terms he uses aren’t just disparaging. It might not seem like it, but Trump is continuing a long tradition in American politics: using language shaped by the Bible.

When the former president says those at the border are “poisoning the blood of our country,” “animals” and “rapists,” his vocabulary mirrors verses from the New Testament. The Book of Revelation, the last book of the Bible, says those kept out of the city of God are “filthy”; they are “dogs and sorcerers and sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters and everyone who loves and practices falsehood.”

In fact, Americans have been using the Bible for centuries to talk about immigrants, especially those they want to keep out. As a scholar of the Bible and politics, I’ve studied how language from Revelation has shaped American ideas about who belongs in the United States – the focus of my book, *Immigration and Apocalypse*.

The shining city

The Book of Revelation describes a vision of the end of the world, when the wicked are punished and the good rewarded. It tells the story of God’s enemies, who worship the evil Beast of the Sea, who bear his mark on their bodies and threaten God’s people. Because of their wickedness, they suffer diseases, catastrophes and war until they are finally destroyed in the lake of fire.

God’s followers, however, enter through the gates of the walls surrounding the New Jerusalem, a holy city that comes down from heaven. God’s chosen people enter through the gates and live in the shining city for eternity.

Eighteenth century evangelists like the English preacher, John Wesley, urged sinners to take the path of righteousness, toward the New

Jerusalem. Throughout American history, many of its Christian citizens have imagined themselves as God’s saints in the New Jerusalem. Puritan colonists believed they were establishing God’s kingdom, both metaphorically and literally. Ronald Reagan likened the nation to the New Jerusalem by describing America as a “shining city . . . built on rocks stronger than oceans, wind-swept, God-blessed, and teeming with people of all kinds living in harmony and peace,” but with city walls and doors.

Reagan was specifically quoting Puritan John Winthrop, one of the founders of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, whose use of the “city on a hill”

If people imagine the U.S. as God’s city, then it’s easy also to imagine enemies who want to invade that city. And this is how unwanted immigrants have been depicted through American history: as enemies of God.

phrase quotes Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. But Reagan’s detailed description closely matches that of the New Jerusalem in Revelation 21. Like God’s heavenly city, Reagan’s picture of America also has strong foundations, walls and gates, and people from every nation bringing in tribute.

Barring the gates

If people imagine the U.S. as God’s city, then it’s easy also to imagine enemies who want to invade that city. And this is how unwanted immigrants have been depicted through American history: as enemies of God.

In the 19th century, when virtually all politicians were Protestant, anti-Catholic politicians accused Irish immigrants of bearing the “mark of the Beast” and being loyal to the “Antichrist,” the pope. They claimed that Irish immigrants could form an unholy army against the nation.

At the turn of the century, “yellow peril” novels

against Chinese immigration imagined a heathen horde taking over the U.S. At the end of one such book, China itself is depicted as a satanic “Black Dragon,” forcing its way through to “Golden Gate” of America.

And all immigrant groups who were unwanted at one time or another have been accused of being “filthy” and diseased, like the enemies of God in Revelation. Italians, Jews, Irish, Chinese and Mexicans were all, at some point, targeted as unhealthy and carrying illness.

In political cartoons from the turn of the 20th century, Eastern European and Jewish immigrants were depicted as rats, while Chinese immigrants were portrayed as a horde of grasshoppers – echoing imagery from Revelation, where locusts with human faces swarm the Earth. During COVID-19, an event itself considered apocalyptic, xenophobic fear was focused on Asian Americans and migrants at the U.S.-Mexico border.

This constellation of labels from Revelation – plague-bearing, bestial, invading, sexually corrupt, murderous – has been reused and recycled throughout American history.

‘Heaven has a wall’

Trump himself has described immigrants as diseased, “not human,” sexual assaulters, violent and those “who don’t like our religion.”

Others have more explicitly used images from Revelation to talk about immigration. Pastor Robert Jeffress, who preached at Trump’s 2017 inauguration church service, told viewers on Fox News’ Fox & Friends, “God is not against walls, walls are not ‘un-Christian,’ the Bible says even heaven is going to have a wall around it.” The Conservative Political Action Conference held a panel in 2017 titled “If Heaven Has a Gate, A Wall, and Extreme Vetting, Why Can’t America?” There are even bumper stickers that say, “Heaven Has a Wall and Strict Immigration Policy / Hell Has Open Borders.”

Revelation 21 indeed describes the heavenly New Jerusalem with a massive shining wall, “clear as crys-

tal,” with pearls for gates. Trump, similarly, talks about his “big, beautiful door,” set in a “beautiful,” massive wall that also has to be “see-through.”

The city of God metaphor has long been a tool for American leaders – both to idealize the nation and to warn against immigration. But the concept of a walled-in city seems increasingly outdated in a digitally connected, global world.

As migration continues to rise around the world due to climate change and conflict, I’d argue that these metaphors and the attitudes they drive are not just obsolete, but exacerbating crisis. ■

Yii-Jan Lin is Associate Professor of New Testament and Public Voices Fellow at Yale University. She is a historian of ideas and biblical texts and the author of The Erotic Life of Manuscripts. Professor Lin specializes in textual criticism, the Revelation of John, critical race theory, gender and sexuality, and immigration. Her book, The Erotic Life of Manuscripts (Oxford 2016), examines how metaphors of race, family, evolution, and genetic inheritance have shaped the

This constellation of labels from Revelation – plague-bearing, bestial, invading, sexually corrupt, murderous – has been reused and recycled throughout American history.

goals and assumptions of New Testament textual criticism from the 18th century to the present. Her just-published book, Immigration and Apocalypse: The Revelation of John in the History of American Immigration, focuses on apocalypticism and the use of Revelation in the political discourse surrounding American immigration – both in utopian visions of America and dystopian fear of “outsiders.” This essay, first published in The Conversation on October 23, 2024 is reprinted with permission of the author.

Evangelicals Quoting Scripture: Whatever Happened to Romans 13?

By David Jordan

Not long ago, our evangelical brothers (and some sisters) seemed to like this Romans passage a lot. So did the previous presidential administration.

“Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God...” (Romans 13:1).

This seems pretty clear. Even if you were convinced that that 2020 election had been stolen (It was not.), it is still hard to escape the arguments of pastors and officials associated with the former administration. I was told the following on several occasions:

“The president is in power because God has ordained it.

That’s what the Bible says (Romans 13:1). Deal with it.”

Interestingly, this argument has been silent for the last four years. Biblical history can teach us some valuable lessons. Let’s begin with the Bible itself.

The Biblical Context

Paul probably composed Romans sometime between 57-58 AD during the reign of Nero (54-68 AD).

While Paul was preparing his letter and advocating holy respect for ruling authorities, the Roman world was relatively calm. Paul’s primary concerns to this point had come from Jewish religious leaders arguing with him over the nature of Jesus, the primacy of the law and the status of Gentiles. Roman soldiers and government officials had often been his allies. (He was a Roman citizen after all, along with other early Christians like Silas, and perhaps Luke.)

Emperor Nero had remained a kind of odd sideshow. He was narcissistic, immature, unconcerned with the broader world, unaware of what he didn’t know, incompetent, impulsive and mostly distracted in his early years of being emperor. He viewed himself as an artist, singer and composer. He wanted and got large crowds of “adoring” spectators. The subsequent rave reviews expected by Nero barely hid the truth. He was mediocre at best, but so taken with pretended responses he began to broaden his exploits to athletic contests. We are told he won races he wasn’t even in. He reveled in the fawning, awards – and the pretense.

When Paul composed Romans, Nero had a been a

strange, emperor-clown, mostly laughed at behind his back. Few took him seriously. The wise and highly competent philosopher Seneca (who tutored Nero and ran the affairs of state from 54-65 AD) was the real power behind the throne. And the empire was run by enough other competent officials. Life went on, the economy thrived and the Christian church continued to grow. Until everything changed.

In the summer of 64 AD, fire raged through Rome. Dry weather and hot winds carried embers, ash and flames over two-thirds of the famous city. Countless lives, priceless works of art, vital historical documents and untold architectural wonders were lost in the con-

When Paul composed Romans, Nero had a been a strange, emperor-clown, mostly laughed at behind his back. Few took him seriously.

flagration. Suspicions leaned in the direction of Nero. (He “fiddled while Rome burned” it was said.) His desire for expanding his palace fanned rumors. A quick move to construct the palatial “golden house” in an area close to where the fire began led many to believe he had the fire set as a prelude to his personal urban renewal. Anger grew. Nero, never one to admit to mistakes, quickly looked for distractions and for others to blame.

It was the Christians, he declared, this growing rabble of unpatriotic, potentially seditious underclass. Tacitus, the famous Roman historian, shares what came next:

Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called “Chrestians” by the populace ... Accordingly, an arrest was first made of all who pleaded guilty; then, upon their information, an immense multitude was convicted, not so much of the crime of firing the city, as of hatred against mankind. Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished,

or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames and burnt, to serve as a nightly illumination, when daylight had expired (Tacitus, Annals).

Christians learned a lesson

From these horrors, Christians understandably began to view the empire and those who ran it with far more concern. Though Nero's persecution was localized to the areas right around Rome, the ramifications for Christians across the empire were profound. At the time of the fire, both Paul and Peter were in Rome. Both are believed to have been martyred soon after. Paul was beheaded. Peter was crucified upside down. Would Paul's perspectives in Romans 13 have been different had they been written after 64? We'll never know. But we do know history.

Nero was forced to commit suicide in 68. The oddities and tragedies of his bizarre reign eventually yielded to the more competent, professional leadership of Vespasian (69-79) and Titus (79-81). Both died natural deaths after successful reigns. Then came Titus' brother, Vespasian's other son, Domitian (81-96).

For Christians, Domitian becomes the new Nero. Domitian, like Nero, was a spoiled, narcissistic playboy. Similar to the latter years of Nero, Domitian began to rule with increasing paranoia, violence and progressively unpredictable decision-making. The worse his behavior, the more Christians perceived the crumbling of Roman authority.

What had been appreciated by Paul (a Roman citizen) and prized by Luke (the author of Luke and Acts and a highly-educated Gentile) the Empire's moral bankruptcy is suddenly laid bare in the early 90s AD:

"Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great! It has become a dwelling place of demons, a haunt of every foul and hateful bird ... for all the nations have drunk the wine of her fornication ..."
(Revelation 18:2-3).

The book of Revelation speaks truth to imperial power. Likely composed between 93-95 AD, during the reign of Domitian (81-96 AD), this well-crafted work of apocalyptic literature becomes a biblical response to devolving Roman power. Throughout, Revelation unveils what Paul in Romans 13, had not yet fully experienced.

In the 40 years from the writing of Romans to the composition of Revelation, Christians confronted a vastly different world of governmental affairs. Now the struggling but growing Christian community views the emperor and his power as a malevolent presence menacing the faith. This Beast of Revelation is evil

incarnate. In this part of the Bible, Imperial Rome no longer remotely resembles the God-sanctioned authority Paul spoke of in Romans 13.

The Separation of Church and State makes sense

This is but one of the many healthy lessons we can glean from our Christian history. So, while evangelicals like to quote Romans 13 when their leaders have ready access to governmental power, accurate readings from the past offer formidable insights and better wisdom. Churches work fine when left alone to divine inspiration. The state is best when we Christians do our civic duty as faith inspires; and, remembering history, we fully respect of the faith of others. Further:

Context matters. So does our application of the Bible. Never should any of us use Romans 13 to excuse governmental overreach. Nor should we acquiesce to authority unethically wielded. And while Revelation never advocates violence, it does call for perceptive understanding and a faithful response.

Humility and kindness are essential. With the ever-present dangers of reckless, thoughtless power, humil-

Context matters. So does our application of the Bible. Never should any of us use Romans 13 to excuse governmental overreach. Nor should we acquiesce to authority unethically wielded.

ity and kindness remain eternal values. The Bible, and especially Jesus, advocates these from the very beginning.

And finally, narcissistic playboy emperors are no joke. They can quickly morph into wicked, demented rulers. Those early Christians concluded that Domitian and the broader empire could be creatively imaged as Nero incarnate and the Beast embodied. The Jewish gematria number 666 still stands for the Pretender, the one posing as a pseudo-savior, a liar who masks evil intent with popular slogans and rising power. Therefore, be on guard.

Taking scripture seriously, let us learn from what has been; and let us apply it rightly to what is now; and let us be prepared for all that is yet to be. ■

Dr. David Jordan is pastor of First Baptist Decatur in Decatur, Georgia. He is a frequent contributor to Christian Ethics Today.

Sexism, Not “Theological Differences”

By Heather Matthews

On Sept. 23, 2024, the *New York Times* published an article that reported, “For the first time in modern American history, young men are now more religious than their female peers.”¹ The article cites a study by the Survey Center on American Life at the American Enterprise Institute.² According to this study, 65 percent of young women do not believe that women are treated equally in the church. The article states, “For girls and young women raised to believe they can do anything men can do, this message is becoming more difficult to digest.” As a result, in recent years many young women have left the church and many are not coming back. The article continues, “For most young women who leave, it’s not about any one issue . . . Rather it was a steady accumulation of negative experiences and dissonant teachings that made it difficult or impossible to stay.” With this article, the secular news media is picking up on a phenomenon that is no secret to women: The church is a place where sexism exists, even thrives.

While in the past women might have ignored these negative experiences, women today label them as sexism, no longer willing to tolerate the blatant disrespect, inequality and abuse that are commonplace in many churches. This trend is in line with my own experiences and research on women in the church which I write about in my book, *Confronting Sexism in the Church: How We Got Here and What We Can Do About It*. The evangelical church has widely taught and accepted that male headship and female submission are biblical. While this belief has been common—though never unchallenged—throughout church history, it has been taught emphatically in recent decades in an attempt to mitigate the changing cultural mores around men and women. This “theology of gender roles” has been elevated to a sign of orthodoxy within complementarian sectors of the evangelical church,³ but it is based on a selective reading and misinterpretation of Scripture and a history steeped in patriarchy, absent women’s voices and leadership.

I believe we are at a tipping point where many are now seeing and labeling the treatment of women in the church as sexism, and this sexism is driving women away from the church. They are convinced that the sexist beliefs, structures and actions supported and defended by followers of Jesus are antithetical to the gospel and ultimately destructive. Women are unable

to reconcile their basic instincts and intellectual understanding of female human dignity as created in God’s image for partnership and co-leadership with men, with the current reality for women in many churches.

Throughout most of church history, women have faced and challenged opposition, barriers and harsh treatment in the church, even as some have supported restrictions for women in the home, church and world on theological grounds. Many, though not all, pastors and theologians have taught in seminaries and in churches that men are created to be leaders in the church and family and that women are created to submit to the authority of men. Men and women alike have upheld these beliefs and supported limitations on women even though others throughout history have opposed them as unbiblical and sexist. Those sup-

Women are unable to reconcile their basic instincts and intellectual understanding of female human dignity as created in God’s image for partnership and co-leadership with men, with the current reality for women in many churches.

porting Christian patriarchy say they like women and believe that God loves women equally; they claim they are simply interpreting the Bible faithfully and living according to the Scriptures.⁴ There are many well-meaning men and women who hold these views who are doing good work in the church and the world.

Yet these beliefs about the place and role of women have consequences. Not surprisingly, theological beliefs that support male headship and female submission frequently and naturally lead to the mistreatment of women. Male Christian leaders have made headlines by taunting women, covering up abuse and sexual immorality, objectifying women’s bodies, and supporting political candidates who regularly embrace misogyny. Some churches have embraced toxic masculinity and sexism, which may be a key factor in bringing men into the church but driving women away.

These consequences are evidence that patriarchy in the church is not merely a neutral theological position

without human consequences. Fundamentally, sexism always begins with an underlying belief, whether conscious or subconscious, that women are less than men.⁵ The basis of patriarchal theology is that women have less authority and responsibility because it is based on the underlying beliefs that women are less reasonable, less trustworthy, less intelligent and less capable. While many holding patriarchal theology say that women are equal in value and worth, their actions communicate something different and leave women feeling defeated and inferior. As a result of Christian sexism, women have been harmed spiritually, psychologically, and often physically. Theology is often the basis for discrimination, microaggressions and a variety of negative treatments of women which can only be labeled as sexism. Women are ignored, excluded, demeaned, objectified, infantilized and demoted.

Women are expected to keep quiet, serve the needs of men, submit to male authority, follow gendered scripts, and be content in the roles that complementarians define as acceptable. Throughout history, some in the church have systematically worked to oppress women's voices and remove women from leadership. At its worst, sexism has led to the abuse of power by men over women, harassment, physical abuse and sexual abuse, which certainly have no place in the church or any grounding in the Bible.

Structures and relationships based on male authority and female submission are not only a matter of opinion or theological disagreement. They are also the foundations of sexism that continues to harm women and the whole church. I define as sexism any belief or practice that that diminishes a woman's identity as fully and equally created in God's image, restricting women on the basis of their sex from actualizing their full identity and utilizing their gifts and abilities in the home, church and world. This is why many women through history have challenged patriarchal teachings, why they refuse to stay silent, and why they are now leaving the church. Women know that the sexism that they experience in the church is not from God because it is damaging the *Imago Dei* that lives inside them. Sexism is crushing to women. They feel the weight of oppression and the inability to fully live as the people that God created them to be.

Women have more power and freedom now than ever before, and they are willing to walk away from faith communities where sexism is entrenched to find places where they will be welcomed, supported and celebrated. I reached my own breaking point about six years ago and I am no longer willing to worship, minister or work in churches or organizations that do not celebrate and embrace women fully. To do so would go against

my core beliefs about my identity and calling.

Some may think it's a harsh exaggeration to label women's experiences in the church as sexism; however, I believe that only by naming sexism for what it is that we will be able to address it. If we continue to support theology that harms women, we will continue to support the *status quo*—and we will never truly understand the real experiences of women. This week, I met a woman who told me of seven women in her department at a Christian organization who have left abusive marriages. This is the rotten fruit of sexism in the church. What was once acceptable to women is no longer acceptable.

We need to collectively reframe our understanding of women's experiences in the church and label them as sexism. When we see women's experiences as sexism, then we can begin to imagine a new future where the church embraces women fully. ■

1 Ruth Graham, "In a First Among Christians, Young Men Are More Religious Than Young Women," *The New York Times*, September 23, 2024, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/09/23/us/young-men-religion-gen-z.html>.

2 "Young Women Are Leaving Church in Unprecedented Numbers," *The Survey Center on American Life* (blog), accessed September 27, 2024, <https://www.americansurveycenter.org/newsletter/young-women-are-leaving-church-in-unprecedented-numbers/>.

3 For example, see "Baptist Faith & Message 2000," The Baptist Faith and Message, The Southern Baptist Convention, accessed January 30, 2024, <https://bfm.sbc.net/bfm2000/>; see also "The Danvers Statement," The Council for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, accessed February 6, 2023, <https://cbmw.org/about/danvers-statement/>.

4 *Editor's note: For more on this topic, see Mutuality Magazine's Translation issue from summer 2024.*

5 Gina Masequesmay, "Sexism," in *Britannica Online Encyclopedia*, last updated October 15, 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/sexism>.

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The Unavoidable Link Between Patriarchal Theology and Spiritual Abuse

By Haley Horton

Theology matters. It shapes the very framework by which we view the world. Who are we? Why are we here?

When our theology advocates traditional, or complementarian, gender roles, the man is defined as “head of the household” and thus acts as “spiritual leader” over the woman. In real world situations, the vague concept of gendered spiritual leadership is left to be defined by the man and can migrate from the spiritual realm to financial, emotional, physical sexual, and religious leadership over the woman. Male decisions govern the home. Supporters of this theology claim that the roles are different but somehow still equal. In theory, the man could use his authority to humbly serve the woman. In reality, it is simply impossible for women and men to be equal when the man is given intrinsic authority over the woman in a relationship and deemed primary or sole decision-maker.

Complementarian theology relies on inequality, putting women in passive roles and men in powerful ones. This inequality allows men to disguise power complexes as love, care, protection and leadership, and manipulates women to believe that to be a good Christian they must obey their husbands. This forms a culture that allows for spiritual abuse, placing even well-meaning couples at a much higher risk of spiritually abusive habits simply by ascribing to traditional “biblical” gender roles.

Defining Spiritual Abuse

What does that mean? Spiritual abuse occurs when a person uses religious texts or beliefs to coerce, control, manipulate or abuse someone knowingly or unknowingly. In the book *Rooted in God's Love*, Dale and Juanita Ryan write, “Spiritual abuse is a kind of abuse that damages the central core of who we are. It leaves us spiritually disorganized and emotionally cut off from the healing love of God.”¹

For example, in “A Conversation about Love and Respect with Sheila Gregoire,” the *Faith and Feminism* podcast reveals how the concept of male spiritual leadership often controls the couple’s sexual relationship.² The podcast shares stories of seemingly kind, Christian men denying the mutuality and depth of passages like 1 Corinthians 7, instead viewing sex

as a man’s need and a woman’s duty. A man could coerce his partner into sexual activities in the name of respect and biblical submission. The ambiguity of spiritual leadership allows for blanket claims like, “You must do this because I say so, and God says you must obey me.”

Many believers are unaware of spiritual abuse or find it hard to identify because it’s masked by theological terms and cherry-picked Bible verses to appear God-approved.

Out in public, a spiritual abuser often looks like the “good Christian,” as he goes to church, talks “Bible talk,” and is liked by many people. In private, however, the woman often experiences a very different person who exhibits abusive or manipulative behaviors. These extremes can be confusing for her and potentially cause her to stay in a spiritually abusive relationship. It could also blind many abusers to their own faults by allowing them to genuinely believe their behaviors are biblically justified.

Spiritual abuse often feeds off a man’s insecurities from the social and theological pressures placed on him. The expectation to be the stereotypically dominant male is not only contrary to the humility taught in Scripture, but also leaves men “with very fragile egos,” as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie commented in her TEDx Talk. She continued by pointing out that “then we do a much greater disservice to girls because we raise them to cater to the fragile egos of men.” Though not focused on religion, Adichie’s analysis describes the struggles many women face in the church. Women may be conditioned by complementarian theology to believe that it is their spiritual *duty* to cater to the fragile ego of the “male leader.”

Spiritual abuse based on complementarian theology can manifest in many ways, but for the sake of gathering a general understanding, here is a list of some common characteristics:

- The man demands respect from the woman without question due to his “God-given” masculine authority.
- The man discourages the woman from having a different opinion, especially theological, political, or social, because God has given him discernment for the both of them.

- The man shames the woman if she publicly expresses an opinion different from his own, because it challenges or even denigrates his male authority.
- The man is unable to see the woman as an accountability partner. If the man criticizes the woman on an issue, he believes he's fulfilling his God-designed responsibility as spiritual leader. But if the woman criticizes the man on an issue, he believes she's disrespecting his authority and therefore rejecting "God's design" for men and women.
- The man emphasizes his dedication to caring for and protecting his partner his partner, but do so only in the way *he* believes is best. Because he is the spiritual leader, he thinks he knows what is best for the woman even if she says otherwise.
- The man rarely, if ever, considers that he could be wrong in his decision-making.
- If the woman confronts the man on an issue, he makes her think that she is overreacting, crazy, or simply a bad partner because she does not trust, is ungrateful for, or is disrespectful of his leadership (a form of gaslighting). He might twist the conversation so that the moral of the story is that the woman must learn to be more forgiving and gracious, as opposed to the man acknowledging his own mistakes.
- The man misuses Scripture to require the woman to perform sexual activities. If she says no, he claims she is denying God's command to please her partner.
- The man demands primary or full control over finances as head of the household.
- The man uses statements like, "You don't love or respect me anymore. If you did, you would..." or "I'm only doing this to love and protect you. Don't you want that?" to emotionally manipulate his partner into doing what he wants.
- The man lies when necessary to protect his good reputation and "Christian testimony."
- The man quotes from Bible passages like Ephesians 5 to require that the woman perform domestic duties and not maintain a career. Or, if she does have a career, the man demands that his career takes priority.

Our Theology Can Harm or It Can Help

As a whole, our theology needs rectification. When men and women are not deemed equal leaders in the

church and in relationships, God's Word is misused to endorse patriarchal systems that allow for, and even condone, spiritual abuse.

It is already difficult for a woman to stand up to an abusive partner; it is even more difficult when she feels that she would also be defying God. In this way, complementarian spiritual abuse capitalizes on the woman's desire to be a good Christian. In their book *The Subtle Power of Spiritual Abuse*, Jeff VanVonderen and David Johnson write that spiritual abuse thrives by, "weakening, undermining, or decreasing that person's spiritual empowerment."³ Complementarian spiritual abuse disrespects the woman's *Imago Dei*, the image of God in her, which emphasizes that God can speak to her too, that she deserves free will not limited by her partner, and that God has blessed her with her own discernment apart from her partner.

When we acknowledge the patriarchal bias ingrained in our terminology, sermons, Bible studies and churches, and when we refine our interpretative process to discover the beauty of biblical equality, we can better identify and prevent spiritual abuse. This is especially true because anytime we learn more about the love, grace and freedom of the Gospel, we are better equipped to recognize when the opposite is proclaimed. When men and women are treated as equals, God's Word is glorified in the joyful empowerment of all voices, and Christian couples are encouraged toward mutual submission, love and respect. And wherever a woman believes God values her leadership and decision-making ability as equal to her husband's, spiritual abuse cannot thrive.

Therefore, we must ask ourselves: Who are we? Why are we here?

May God help us see we are all beloved, made in the image of God. We are here for God's glory as we "learn to do right, seek justice, defend the oppressed" (Is. 1:17, NIV) ■

Haley Horton is a physics researcher for a federal contractor serving NASA and the Department of Defense. In her spare time, she runs a small business and Instagram blog @TheWhimzyShop where she advocates for biblical equality, women in STEM, and faith and science in harmony. This 2020 Christians for Biblical Equality's award-winning essay was published in The Priscilla Papers, and is reprinted with permission.

After 50 Years, ‘Liberation Theology’ Is Still Reshaping Catholicism and Politics – But What Is It?

By Leo Guardado

It isn’t often that theology makes headlines. But for the past 50 years, a way of thinking about God and poverty has been doing just that: liberation theology.

Liberation theology’s approach to living out Christian faith has been both globally influential and bitterly controversial. It has been investigated by the CIA on suspicion of promoting social unrest and inquisitioned by a former pope who accused it of getting too close to Marxist thought. It has even inspired conspiracy theories. Critics have dismissed it as naive – but also called it a threat to free market capitalism.

Fifty years have passed since the landmark publication of the book most associated with liberation theology: “A Theology of Liberation,” by a Peruvian priest named Gustavo Gutiérrez. Gutiérrez, whose most recent manuscript I’m helping to edit, published the book in Spanish in 1971, and then in English in 1973. With its emphasis on the liberation of oppressed people, especially the poor, this book helped reconfigure many Catholics’ ways of thinking about the relationship between faith and justice.

As a theologian who grew up during the civil war in El Salvador, I emphasize to my university students that it is impossible to grasp the beating heart of this theology without paying attention to the poverty and legacies of colonialism in Latin America.

Urgent questions

Since colonization, the wealthy few have owned most of the land in Latin America, rendering the majority poor and landless. By the mid-20th century, Christians involved in social and political movements for greater justice in the region were asking what, if anything, their faith had to do with these struggles.

In 1968, Roman Catholic bishops and theologians gathered for a meeting in Medellín, Colombia, to assess the state of the church in the continent. The bishops wrote that “a deafening cry pours from the throats of millions of persons, asking their pastors for a liberation that reaches them from nowhere else.”

The “inhuman wretchedness” of poverty, they argued, was the result of systematic injustice that structured the profound inequality of Latin American

society. They called this “institutionalized violence” – similar to what the famed sociologist Johan Galtung would term “structural violence” a year later.

When Gutiérrez’s text was published a few years later, it addressed more fully these questions about the relationship between faith and justice. Today, the book has been translated into 14 languages – most recently to Arabic.

Taking a side

One dimension of liberation theology has to do with

Poverty, Gutiérrez and other theologians have argued, is an evil – something they believe God does not want – for it can bring suffering and early death. In this view, poverty is not a natural condition; it is a violence that some communities inflict upon others.

analyzing the sources of social inequality. Its approach treats poverty as a complex phenomenon that cannot be reduced to economics or separated from politics, because it intersects with other forms of oppression, such as sexism and racism. Poverty, Gutiérrez and other theologians have argued, is an evil – something they believe God does not want – for it can bring suffering and early death. In this view, poverty is not a natural condition; it is a violence that some communities inflict upon others.

The key principle of liberation theology is “the preferential option for the poor.” This is a commitment to prioritize the material needs of the poor, as well as their knowledge, experience and spirituality. This principle is grounded in the conviction that God is not neutral, but is always on the side of those who most struggle to live.

El Salvador's saint

To advocates of liberation theology, embracing the “preferential option for the poor” means struggling alongside people whose societies are considered insignificant, and sharing their life and death. Oscar Romero, archbishop of San Salvador in the late 1970s, is often admired as an example of a Catholic leader living out liberation theology. “All those who draw close to suffering flesh have God close at hand,” he said in one homily.

In the lead-up to El Salvador's 12-year civil war, Romero fought for agrarian reform for landless rural farmers. He mediated among labor unions, popular guerrilla organizations and the military to try to prevent armed conflict. He established the country's foremost human rights and legal aid organization and urged U.S. President Jimmy Carter to cease U.S. financial support for El Salvador's military.

In one of his last homilies, he asked soldiers to stop the killing – just a day before being assassinated by military agents in March 1980.

Romero was canonized in 2018 by Pope Francis, who has said that prioritizing the poor is “the key criterion of Christian authenticity.”

Controversial then – and now

One of the most persistent critiques against liberation theology is that it gives rise to revolutionary violence and that, since it is influenced by Marxist analysis, it believes violent class conflict is inevitable. Most strands of liberation theology condemn violence, although they draw a distinction between the institutionalized violence of inequality and violence against injustice itself.

A different kind of critique argues that liberation theology is too political – that it reduces salvation to

human action, not God's actions. In this view, liberation “theology” is more of a secular philosophy, or leftist social commentary. Some of these critiques shaped how the Vatican initially responded to liberation theology. Pope Francis has been more favorable toward it, telling theologians, for example, “Do not settle for a desktop theology,” but to focus on real people and real life.

Critics of liberation theology have proclaimed it is passe, irrelevant, even dead – but prematurely, it seems. Today, liberation theology's reach has spread far beyond Latin America and Roman Catholicism: from Black theology of liberation to Islamic liberation theology; from Hindu to Jewish and Palestinian ones; and to feminist and queer theologies that have been influenced by liberation theology.

Liberation theology will likely always have its critics, but its supporters continue to build on the legacy of the past 50 years wherever they see poverty, injustice and oppression. ■

Most strands of liberation theology condemn violence, although they draw a distinction between the institutionalized violence of inequality and violence against injustice itself.

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“When we go before God, God will ask,
“Where are your wounds?” And we will say, “I have no wounds.”
And God will ask, “Was there nothing worth fighting for?”

Allan Boesak

Book Review

How to End Christian Nationalism

By: Amanda Tyler (Minneapolis, MN, Broadleaf Books, 2024, 244 pages)

Review by: J. Brent Walker

Amanda Tyler has written a much-needed book about the dangers implicit in Christian nationalism and how it compromises religious liberty and threatens the body politic. Full disclosure: Tyler is a former intern, staffer, board of directors member of mine, and now my successor as executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee for the past eight years. All subscribers to *Christian Ethics Today* need to read this book.

To call it a primer would be to depreciate it. The book is nothing short of a complete takedown of Christian nationalism along with a practical step-by-step strategy for countering it. This fight is most effectively waged by Christians – religious cousins, not secular opponents – because we will carry special credibility.

That is why Tyler led the formation of Christians Against Christian Nationalism and in five years has amassed over 40,000 signers to endorse its statement of principles (pp. 13-15). Readers of this journal should join the cause (christiansagainatchristiannationalism.org). To begin with, the book defines Christian nationalism:

“Christian nationalism is a political ideology and cultural framework that seeks to fuse American and Christian identities. It suggests that ‘real’ Americans are Christians and that ‘true’ Christians hold a particular set of political beliefs. It seeks to create a society in which only this narrow subset of Americans is privileged by law and in societal practice” (p. 26).

Christian nationalism is not monolithic. It spans the spectrum of thought and action. On one end are those who want to privilege Christianity (their version of it) with a modicum of toleration for others and, on the other side, those advocating for a full-blown theocracy with second-class citizenship for other fellow Americans. The term Christian nationalism is relatively new, but the problem is age-old. It’s been around for centuries, starting probably when Roman

Emperor Constantine embraced Christianity as the favored religion in the empire in the fourth century. It has ebbed and flowed throughout history with visible modern high tides such as Nazi Germany in the previous century.

In the U.S. it is rooted in the Christian nation myth – that America was intended by our founders to be and should be a Christian nation. This is a false narrative. Yes, most of our founders were Christians of some ilk – mixed with deists and probably a few non-believers. And, yes, they thought religion would be good for the new republic. But they didn’t want the Federal government to do the lifting. First, there was considerable pluralism in the colonies even 250 years ago. Whose religion? Which denomination? What sect?

Second, they knew how government-enforced reli-

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gion resulted in persecution and bloodshed in Europe and in the colonies as well. They wanted to avoid that at all costs. Accordingly, in Article VI of the new constitution, the founders banned any religious test as a qualification for public office – even though many of the colonies had religious requirements in their charters. They knew what they were forbidding. Then our prescient founders adopted the First Amendment to protect religious liberty by stripping the new Federal government of power to privilege or prohibit religion.

So, we today may be a Christian nation – sociologically and demographically – in the sense that a majority self-identify as Christians; but we are not such a nation legally or constitutionally. Tyler finishes the initial survey by discrediting various species of Christian nationalism which have been and still are allied with White Supremacy (Charlottesville), anti-indigenous people projects (extraction of children from families) and outright violence (January 6). The next chapter argues that we should not only speak as nominal Christians, but act as followers of Jesus. We juxtapose

our gospel of love with Christian nationalism's idols of power, fear and violence.

And, citing Episcopal Presiding Bishop Michael Curry, three steps are offered to counter Christian nationalism: They include "(1) re-centering Christianity on the teachings and example of Jesus; (2) calling on our common humanity; and (3) rebuilding relationships with people across political, racial and religious differences" (p. 72). This chapter concludes – as the rest of them do – with appropriate scripture reading and helpful suggestions for action. To be Christ-like means at the very least to denounce violence. This includes gun violence – our "idolatrous devotion to guns and gun culture" (p. 81), political violence (January 6) and rhetorical violence (ReAwaken American rallies). The next step in the opposition is to commit to the separation of church and state.

If the genesis of American Christian nationalism is the Christian nation myth, its perpetuation is a misunderstanding of the separation principle – a belief that church-state separation is "junk" according to Rep. Lauren Boebert (p. 99). The "wall of separation" is a metaphor to express the deeper truth that religious liberty is best protected when church and state are institutionally separate and neither tries to perform or interfere with the mission or work of the other. This was quite clear to founders Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, and to Baptists from Roger Williams, to John Leland, to Jimmy Carter. The exact words may not appear in the First Amendment, but the principle surely does, and those who wrote the words and our Baptist forebears had the words in them.

In step five, "Take on Christian Nationalism Close to Home," Tyler differentiates between patriotism and nationalism. Patriotism – love of country – is natural, heart-felt and laudable. Nationalism – patriotism on steroids – is authoritarian, forced and ultimate. I've heard it suggested that nationalism says "my country, right or wrong," while patriotism declares "my country, when wrong, make it right." Here the nettlesome issues – particularly in "purple churches" – of American flags displayed in the sanctuary and speaking out against nationalism from the pulpit are addressed.

The final three chapters focus more on how-tos, using labor and civil rights as models for organizing. An entire chapter is devoted to protecting religious freedom in the public schools – a bugaboo on the church-state front for over 60 years. Prayers have not been kicked out, only official state-sponsored prayers

have and properly so. Teaching about religion, academically and objectively, is permissible; leading devotional religious exercises is not. Tyler then tackles current hot potato topics like religious counselors/chaplains and the posting of the Ten Commandments and "In God We Trust" in public schools. In the final chapter, readers are urged to take their place in the public square.

All citizens – including religious ones – are called to become involved in rigorous but civil debate and allow their religiously based ethics to inform their public policy views. Depending on the issue, people of faith are encouraged to find common cause with non-religious people. But, houses of worship, along with secular Section 501(C)(3) charities, are barred from endorsing or opposing candidates for public office with tax-exempt dollars.

In conclusion, the importance of this book has been upped by the political events subsequent to its recent publication. The political party most amenable to Christian nationalism has swept the three branches of the Federal government and many state and local

Here is Tyler's concluding challenge: "Together, through our collective work to end Christian nationalism, we will discern the society that has yet to exist. Together we are imagining a world of justice, equity, and no fear, and together we are making that world possible through brave acts of love."

elections, too. Here is Tyler's concluding challenge: "Together, through our collective work to end Christian nationalism, we will discern the society that has yet to exist. Together we are imagining a world of justice, equity, and no fear, and together we are making that world possible through brave acts of love." ■

J. Brent Walker is an attorney and ordained Baptist minister. He now serves as Executive Director Emeritus of the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty. He and wife Nancy live in Falls Church, VA, and are enjoying their church, friends, family and grandchildren.

Staying Grounded: Ten Rules for Engaging in Politics without Losing Your Mind

By Will Wright

Stop me if you've heard this one: "I don't follow politics because it's all just lies and corruption." Or maybe, "It's too stressful — I'd rather focus on things I can actually control." Or even, "Nothing ever changes, so why bother?"

I've heard these reasons (and even thought them myself at times), but over the years, I've realized that disengaging from politics doesn't make the noise go away — it just leaves the decisions to others. That said, I understand how overwhelming it can feel to navigate the endless headlines, divisive rhetoric, and the constant demand to "pick a side."

To stay sane while engaging in this chaotic world of politics, I've developed a set of personal principles. These 10 rules help me keep my mind clear, my conversations constructive, and my focus on what truly matters. They aren't etched in stone — I tweak them as needed — but they've been invaluable in helping me engage with intention rather than frustration.

If you've ever felt exhausted, disillusioned, or downright apathetic about politics, I hope these principles resonate with you. My goal is to make your political journey a little less overwhelming and a lot more meaningful.

1. Don't Defend Politicians as if They're beyond Criticism

Politicians craft their messages carefully, but that doesn't mean we should interpret their words or actions beyond what's explicitly stated. I've learned to focus on what they actually say and do, rather than projecting my assumptions or loyalties onto them. Defending individuals I don't know personally serves no purpose; instead, I choose to support ideas and policies that align with my values. Sure, we all have our favorite politicians because they championed something we care about, but it's crucial to avoid giving anyone a free pass, whether their last name is Obama or Trump. At the end of the day, politicians are public servants — we should admire their work, not excuse their faults.

2. Accept That You Can't Be an Expert on Everything

Running a country is no small task, and politics is a

vast, complex field — no single person can know it all. Rather than pretending to have all the answers, I focus on areas where I feel confident and freely admit when I'm unfamiliar with a topic. Saying "I don't know" isn't a weakness; it's a sign of humility and openness.

Thankfully, there are countless resources to help deepen your understanding, from books and articles to podcasts and discussion groups. With today's abundance of specialized media, you can dive into specific topics like never before. For example, if you're curious about the intersection of faith and politics, I might just know a podcast you'd enjoy!

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3. Don't Let the Media Decide What Matters Most to You

Media outlets often prioritize stories based on their own agendas, which can lead to a distorted view of the world if we rely solely on them. Sensationalism and clickbait often overshadow nuanced, important topics, steering our attention toward what's most profitable for them — not necessarily what's most impactful for us.

Social media algorithms and 24-hour news cycles thrive on outrage and polarization, but we don't have to play along. By intentionally filtering what I consume and questioning why certain stories are being pushed, I stay informed without being swept away by the noise of the latest headlines.

Ultimately, taking control of what I focus on helps me engage with politics on my own terms, rather than letting the media decide for me.

4. Let Go of Outrage Over Hypocrisy

If I'm honest, hypocrisy in politics used to drive me up the wall. It felt infuriating to watch leaders contradict themselves or hold others to standards they wouldn't meet. But I've come to realize that fixating on hypocrisy can be a massive distraction from the real issues that matter. Politics is inherently full of contradictions, and while calling out hypocrisy is valid, letting it consume my energy and focus is unproductive.

For instance, the minority party in Congress will almost always position itself as more fiscally conservative than the majority party — it's a predictable cycle. Once I started recognizing these patterns of hypocrisy as part of the political landscape, I found it easier to focus on meaningful aspects of governance, policy, and accountability.

5. Think of Political Parties as Tools, Not Identities

Political parties exist to organize ideas and mobilize action, but they don't define who I am. While I consider myself a Democrat because, at a national level, their platform aligns with many of the things I value, I recognize that no party is perfect or all-encompassing.

By keeping my beliefs front and center, I avoid falling into the trap of treating political parties like a core part of my identity. They're a means to an end, not a club to join unconditionally. This perspective has freed me to question, criticize and even diverge from my party when its actions or priorities don't align with my values.

When I treat parties as tools rather than identities, I engage with politics more thoughtfully and authentically. It's not about loyalty to a brand; it's about staying true to the principles that matter most to me.

6. Read Source Documents when Possible

It's easy to rely on articles, summaries, political pundits on TV, or even social media posts to keep up with political issues. But whenever I really want to understand an issue that's important to me, I make it a point to go directly to the source — whether it's legislation, legal filings, or official transcripts. This approach allows me to form my own opinions without relying entirely on someone else's interpretation or spin.

With tools like artificial intelligence at our fingertips, it's easier than ever to analyze and understand complex documents. Here's a tip: the next time Congress passes a bill that interests you, download the PDF and upload it into a platform like ChatGPT to ask questions or summarize it. It's a powerful way to challenge your own biases and dig deeper into the details that matter most.

7. Be Open to Changing Your Mind

Politics is constantly evolving, and recognizing this has helped me avoid becoming too attached to specific policies, trends, or ideologies. Change is inevitable, whether it's in leadership, societal values, or the political landscape itself.

Staying open to new information and perspectives allows me to engage with politics in a way that is fluid and adaptable, rather than rigid and dogmatic. This doesn't mean abandoning core values — it means being willing to refine opinions as new evidence or insights come to light. In a world as complex as ours, flexibility isn't just helpful; it's essential for thoughtful and meaningful engagement.

8. Seek Out Different Perspectives

Some of the most valuable insights come from engaging with people who see the world differently. Actively seeking out these perspectives sharpens your understanding, broadens your worldview, and fosters empathy.

If you're liberal, make an effort to explore trusted conservative voices, podcasts, and articles — and vice versa if you're a conservative. Listening to thoughtful and well-reasoned arguments, even when you disagree, helps you better understand the nuances of opposing views.

One of the things I enjoy most about our podcast is my co-host's contrasting perspective. We often disagree on political issues, but his insights help me see American politics through a more holistic lens. It's a reminder that understanding doesn't always mean agreement, but it always enriches the conversation.

9. Ask "Who Benefits?"

When evaluating a policy or decision, one of the most revealing questions you can ask is, "Who stands to gain or lose from this?" This simple question often uncovers the motivations, interests, and potential biases behind political actions or narratives.

Whether it's a piece of legislation, a campaign promise, or a media story, following the trail of who benefits can provide deeper clarity on why certain decisions are being made or why specific issues are being prioritized. It's not about cynicism — it's about understanding the power dynamics at play.

10. Don't Assume You Know Why Someone Voted the Way They Did

Voting is a deeply personal decision, shaped by a complex mix of beliefs, priorities, and life experiences. It's tempting to assume that someone's vote reflects a

specific value or belief, but the reality is often far more nuanced. People may choose a candidate for reasons that don't fully align with the candidate's platform or public image.

Rather than jumping to conclusions, I approach these conversations with curiosity and empathy. Asking questions and listening to understand their perspective not only fosters more respectful dialogue but also helps build bridges across political divides. Assumptions shut conversations down — curiosity opens them up.

Closing Thoughts

These 10 principles haven't eliminated every frustration I've faced, but they've transformed how I engage with politics. By staying focused, intentional, and grounded, I've found a way to navigate the noise while

remaining true to my values.

If you've ever felt overwhelmed, disillusioned or simply exhausted by the state of politics, I hope these insights offer you some clarity and peace. Politics doesn't have to be a constant source of stress. With a thoughtful approach, it can become a pathway to understanding, meaningful connection, and even hope for a better future. ■

William Wright is the creator/producer and host of the Faithful Politics Podcast. Each week William (Democrat), and his cohost Pastor Josh Burtram (Republican) cover topics that intersect the world of faith and politics. You can follow him on Twitter @FaithfulPolitik. This article originally appeared on the Faithful Politics Substack and is reprinted here with permission of the author.

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If a Felon Can Lead, Why Can't Felons Vote?

By Nicole Wiesen

In the United States, we celebrate narratives of redemption, freedom and equality yet continue to undermine those ideals when it comes to our justice-impacted citizens. This contradiction is laid bare every election cycle when the same citizens who champion “second chances” through their church ministries conveniently vote for leaders who legislate against the very populations they claim to support.

This hypocrisy is particularly stark among the Christian right, which calls for prison ministry but does not advocate for the full reintegration of individuals with a felony conviction back into society.

Voting, housing and employment rights remain restricted for people who have served time, and yet we permit, if not embrace, the notion that a felon can be president of the United States. If we can elect a felon to the highest office in the land, why do we resist the idea that returning citizens should be able to rent a home, apply for a job or vote? Why should a criminal record that often has no bearing on a person's present-day capabilities dictate their opportunities for decades after they have served their time?

The Christian right claims to embody the values of forgiveness and compassion, yet this support often stops short of advocating for real systemic change. In prison, men and women seeking solace from the scars of incarceration are introduced to the idea of second chances through sermons and faith-based programs. But when these individuals reenter society, churches that promoted “grace” and “acceptance” rarely rally behind them in ways that lead to true, practical change — such as pushing for fair hiring practices, voting rights or affordable housing access.

“Churches that promoted ‘grace’ and ‘acceptance’ rarely rally behind them in ways that lead to true, practical change.”

Take, for example, Atlanta's so-called America's Freedom Church, which purports to support those who have been incarcerated but has demonstrated (personal experience, 2024) that it's more interested in control than freedom. This institution is emblematic of how the so-called “freedom” promised by certain churches and organizations is often little more than an exercise in subjugation.

Women in particular who attempt to take on leadership roles, especially if they challenge the church's authority, find themselves sidelined, dismissed or

worse. This attitude reinforces a male-dominated hierarchy that has little to do with freedom or forgiveness and everything to do with maintaining power over the vulnerable.

The hypocrisy is profound: Christians say they welcome the sinner into their fold, yet how many of these “ministries” are advocating that returning citizens have equal access to housing and employment? How many of them fight to remove the box that felons must check when applying for a job? If their compassion is genuine, why isn't the church leading the charge to eliminate background checks or lobbying to make returning citizens' votes count?

Society cannot continue to trumpet second chances and grace while denying real pathways for justice-

When felons leave prison, they often are subject to laws that bar them from certain jobs, disqualify them from housing and exclude them from civic participation. This marginalization perpetuates poverty, recidivism and, in many cases, despair.

impacted individuals to reclaim their lives.

If a person with a felony record can hold the highest position in the nation, it should be time to let them vote, rent and work freely. Our society already has accepted, by precedent, that people with criminal backgrounds are capable of holding office, yet the same society often denies them their basic civil rights. Allowing individuals with felony records to vote is essential to a functioning democracy; it is absurd that they remain some of the most disenfranchised members of our electorate while we willfully ignore past convictions for those seeking the Oval Office.

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Voting, employment and housing rights are not privi-

leges — they are foundational rights that allow people to contribute meaningfully to society. Requiring people to check a box that marks them as “criminals” before they’ve even had a chance to prove themselves in the workforce is punitive and outdated. And requiring background checks that do nothing but dredge up mistakes from years past is a lazy proxy for evaluating a person’s actual qualifications and character today.

“Everyone deserves the opportunity to move beyond their past mistakes and prove their worth through their actions today.”

The “Ban the Box” movement has gained some traction in recent years, with advocates arguing the checkbox on applications asking about criminal records is inherently discriminatory. Studies have shown this box is not only a barrier but also a breeding ground for prejudice. In fact, simply seeing that box leads many hiring managers to discard an application without ever reading it.

By banning the box and eliminating mandatory background checks for nonsensitive positions, we can give returning citizens a fair shot at reintegrating into society. Everyone deserves the opportunity to move beyond their past mistakes and prove their worth through their actions today.

Returning citizens are, in many ways, among the most qualified to tackle issues such as public safety, community engagement and even leadership. They bring a unique perspective that can enrich our workplaces, our communities and our democracy. If we trust their judgment enough to consider them viable political candidates, we should certainly trust them with jobs, housing and the right to vote.

We must ask ourselves: Are we a nation that truly believes in redemption, or are we simply paying lip service to the concept? If we believe in redemption,

we must act accordingly by removing barriers that prevent people with criminal histories from participating fully in society. This means expanding voting rights, dismantling unnecessary background checks, banning the box and creating employment and housing opportunities based on potential and character, not outdated biases.

A truly just and inclusive society would be one where we not only advocate for returning citizens within the walls of a prison ministry, but open doors for them in all aspects of life. It’s time for churches, employers and voters alike to embrace this vision and act upon it. We must put our principles into practice, extending grace and opportunity beyond words and into action. ■

Nicole Wiesen is a Public Voices Fellow on racial justice in early childhood with the OpEd Project in partnership with the National Black Child Development Institute, advocating advancing mental health resources for previously incarcerated individuals. She also a current member of the National Association of Social Workers. Published with permission of Baptist News Global, November 13, 2024.

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—Foy Valentine, *Founding Editor*

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The Christian Ethics Today Foundation publishes *Christian Ethics Today* in order to provide laypersons, educators and ministers with a resource for understanding and responding in a faithful Christian manner to moral and ethical issues that are of concern to contemporary Christians, to the church, and to society.

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- Maintain an independent prophetic voice for Christian social ethics
- Interpret and apply Christian experience, biblical truth, theological insights, historical understanding and current research to contemporary moral issues
- Support Christian ecumenism by seeking contributors and readers from various denominations and churches
- Work from the deep, broad center of the Christian church
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