

Last week, when I preached about Charlie Kirk, I mentioned his shooter's ties to a group started by Nick Fuentes, a far-right Christian Nationalist. Reliable evidence hasn't emerged yet to define his motive. He may end up on the right, on the left, or just trying to get Jodie Foster's attention. We don't know yet, and for the sake of transparency, I wanted to own my overzealous description.

But let's talk about Christian Nationalism. On the surface, it's got things we like, right? "Christian" sounds great, and my nation matters. But Christian Nationalism doesn't mean you love Jesus and love your country. You can love those things, but that's not what Christian Nationalism is. Nationalism is not the same thing as patriotism. Patriotism says "I love my country enough to make it the best it can be;" nationalism says, "my country is the best." Patriotism says "if we're doing something wrong, we need to fix it," and nationalism says, "the nation can do no wrong." Patriotism allows for disagreement, argument, improvement; the Preamble to the Constitution says we strive for "a more perfect union." Nationalism says, "the union's already perfect." A country that fosters patriotism holds itself to account. A country that fosters nationalism holds its people to account. Patriotism has -- within its own framework -- paths toward improvement and a protection of the freedom to speak up when things go wrong. Nationalism has within its framework the denial of wrongdoing by the state and the steady threat of persecution for those who speak out.

So what about the "Christian" part of "Christian Nationalism?" Sounds fine, We like Christian things. Christ said good stuff I wish more people did, like loving their neighbors. But in Christian Nationalism, the Christian bit doesn't actually promote Christianity. It promotes the total replacement of all other religions by the nation's definition of Christianity. Using Christian vocabulary, names, and stories, the end result is a distortion of Christianity that deifies the nation and consecrates the heads of government. It's tough to define exactly what Christian Nationalism is because it's not consistent. But there are some reliable threads, namely, a belief that the Bible is about our country now, that God wants our country to succeed at the expense of other countries, that the government should work to preserve and promote Christian values, and that the separation of church and state is a hindrance to achieving those goals. Pretty much always, it supports the supremacy of a single ethnic group, and dissent is nothing less than a critique of the infallible sacred state. Put differently, the patriotic understanding of religion's place is spelled out in our Constitution: you can practice whatever faith you like, and the government shouldn't encroach on that. But in Christian Nationalism, a single denomination is allowed. Nationalism is the goal, Christianity is misused to provide the tools of control.

When people speak, typically, we know what they mean. But those in power often use common words to mean something different. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea, for example, is laughably misnamed. They call it democratic, they say it's the peoples', they say it's a republic, but it's none of those things. Just 'cause it's in the name doesn't make it so. Christian Nationalism is the same. By the way, if you think of yourself as a Christian Nationalist but don't believe this stuff, you're not a Christian Nationalist. You've been hoodwinked by vocabulary. Maybe you're a patriot that's also a Christian, and that's okay. But Christian Nationalism is not. Ultimately, it takes all the attributes we apply to God and puts the nation in God's place. America becomes all-knowing, all-good, ever-present, and ever-faithful...so long as you're ever-faithful to it. And the way things are playing out now, it's not just the nation that's taking God's place; massive corporations and the unfathomably wealthy become our saints, secret police replace our sentinels, and grifters supplant our prophets. Long-held Christian teachings like love, empathy, respect, and justice are quaint holdovers that Jesus didn't actually mean, and the power of scripture bears down on any deviation, even when the deviation isn't addressed in scripture.

In our context, we're currently allowed to exist under the protections of the First Amendment. We say the prayers we say, I preach the way I preach, you attend whatever church you like. Same goes for the Methodists, the Catholics, the Baptists, the Jews, the Muslims, the Sikhs, and so on. We all have the freedom to worship as we please. But Christian Nationalism, in its necessary purity of belief, threatens not just Jews, Muslims, and Sikhs. It threatens all Christian denominations that insist our scripture and our traditions say what they actually say. One of the ongoing patterns we're seeing now's the chipping away at that same First Amendment. TV hosts lose jobs. Longheld tenets of Christianity are disregarded as weak. The theological claims behind that rainbow flag are getting close to being labeled as justifying terrorism. Christianity isn't perfect, y'all, it never has been. We know that, and we strive to make it better, to serve our communities more fully, to grow in relationship with God. I'm worried that the way we practice our faith is coming under fire. I know that may sound alarmist, but warnings from alarm bells just keep coming to fruition. So, I'm worried. I'm worried, among other things, about the Anglican approach to scripture. Like the story of the dishonest manager -- that's probably not upholding shrewdness or theft as some kind of virtue. Look at where that section ends. After a whole story of Jesus describing how things do work, he switches to how things should work. You cannot serve two masters. Why? Because if you try to serve both, you'll serve neither well and'll probably end up replacing one with the other. Replacing God with wealth in the dishonest manager's case, but maybe that's a model for other pairings, too. What do we value so much that we make God compete with it? The nation? A human leader? A false narrative?

Especially in the propaganda-laden context we find ourselves, it's hard to navigate this stuff. Remember that old nugget of how to discern when discernment seems impossible. Remember "you will know them by their fruits." We will know truth for sure when we see where this leads, but we don't have the luxury of waiting. We've gotta live our faith now, learn from the lessons of history now, be patriotic enough to call out our nation's faults now, and Christian enough to love our neighbors through the troubles now. We will know them by their fruits, but also, we've seen the fruits of history and recognize the patterns. It's like baking a cake with a familiar recipe. We've seen the recipe enough to know a cake's coming at the end. Well y'all, they've left the recipe out on the countertop, and we've gotta be real about what they're cooking. Christian Nationalism is not good for Christianity or for the nation. It's as heretical as anything I've known, and it is our duty, good Christian souls, it is our duty to remind this community what Christianity's about and who it's for.

We're about God. We center our lives on that God's expansive love and creativity. Because we're centered on that God, we love our neighbors, all our neighbors, especially the ones our society scapegoats. Christian Nationalism would have us fall at the feet of an autocrat. Christianity would have us fall at the feet of the discarded. These days, that means trans folks, Spanish speakers, Palestinians, the poor, those strong enough to admit they were misled, and those weak enough to need a hand up. We serve each other because we see God in each other. We serve as Christ's own hands and Christ's own feet. We inspire this community with our faithfulness and integrity, and we make ourselves, Christianity, and our nation better by doing all this with honesty, charity, and love. That's us, folks. We love all our neighbors, respect the dignity of every human being, seek justice, defend the oppressed, and walk humbly. Jesus says we cannot serve two masters. Well y'all, that's an easy choice. We serve God.