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# PERSPECTIVES ON CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM

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## ABSTRACT

Christian nationalism is theocracy in a Christian context. It is being proposed by many evangelicals, especially those in the MAGA movement. Christian nationalism was implemented in a covert sort of way in the Trump administration. Should Donald Trump be re-elected president in November 2024, all indications are that what was covert will move to the overt. Theocracy, Christian or not, is inherently anti-democratic, exclusionary, and divisive. This paper places Christian nationalism into a historical context. It also discusses present developments and plans for the future. This paper argues that evangelicals have drifted far from their original calling and have turned politics into a sort of idol. It calls for a major course correction, for the sake of democracy, as well as for the integrity and reputation of the evangelical faith itself.

## INTRODUCTION

U.S. evangelicalism is at a crossroads. Many American evangelicals favor Christian Nationalism, a form of theocracy. Should that occur, the U.S. government would be based on a religious philosophy, rather than by a diverse collection of people from many religious (or secular) backgrounds. It is important to emphasize, however, that not all evangelicals are in favor of imposing this option on the nation. Evangelicalism in the U.S. has become thoroughly politicized and seriously divided. Trust is in short supply. Previously stable social and governmental institutions (the judiciary, for example) have been destabilized as trust has slowly eroded. A good portion of the evangelical church has allowed politics to dominate (and often obscure) faith issues. Evangelicalism, like the nation itself, is a house divided. It wasn't always that way.

In the past, U.S. evangelicalism was a respected social institution. Evangelicals were people of the Bible – widely perceived as people of integrity. Its theological underpinnings can be traced back to the Protestant Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. In the U.S., evangelicalism took root in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century in the context of Pietism and Puritanism. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, evangelicals were strong advocates for reform, involved in movements such as temperance, and the abolition of slavery. It successfully weathered debates over bible interpretation. Evangelicals have traditionally been concerned with social ministries, with support for the poor, the marginalized and the immigrant.

In the last half of the 20th century, evangelicals were confronted by massive social change -- the sexual revolution, pornography, feminism, gay rights, and abortion. It was also distracted with, and embarrassed by, a number of public scandals involving prominent evangelical leaders. In 1962, the Supreme Court ruled against school-led prayer. In response to these and other similar changes, the Moral Majority, brainchild of Baptist minister Jerry Falwell, was formed in the late 1970's. Falwell understood the power of television which allowed him to bring his message -- an amalgam of fundamentalist Christian faith and Republican politics -- into the homes of millions of people each week.

The Moral Majority brought many evangelicals into the Republican Party and introduced them to a politicized gospel. ('Evangelicalism', 2024)

### **A LONG DECLINE**

At a time when the church is declining – in numbers and in influence – it seems odd that it would turn people away with policies that are the expression of an unhealthy sense of superiority and entitlement. U.S. society is lacking civility, respect, compassion and grace. Today's evangelical church seems to be taking its cues from the New Testament Pharisees, legalistic purveyors of a loveless faith, not from Jesus of Nazareth. As of 2016, there were an estimated 619 million evangelicals worldwide – one quarter of all Christians -- with the largest percentage living in the United States. Evangelicals have grown increasingly uncomfortable with – and out of step with – changing social issues. In 1990, approximately 90% of the U.S. population identified as Christian. By 2010, only 20 years later, it had fallen to 63% -- a 27-point drop in just 20 years. Significantly, the number of people who describe themselves as having “no religion” increased from 19 to 29% in the last decade. The change was greatest among Protestants. ('Evangelicalism', 2024)

U.S. evangelicalism has been an active participant in, and has been an initiator of, some of the contentious issues polarizing the nation. Christian nationalism is one of those contentious issues. Evangelicalism has, to use the language of the book of Revelation, lost its first love. Its commitment to the Lord and to his church has turned lukewarm as the idol of politics has taken precedence for many. Preaching the gospel of Christ has been set aside by a good number of evangelicals, replaced by political maneuvering designed to make Christianity the state religion and Donald Trump its de facto leader.

### **AMERICAN CARNAGE**

In November 2016, Donald J. Trump was elected President of the United States. Eighty percent of evangelicals voted for him. In 2020, 84% of evangelicals voted for Donald Trump. Trump's inauguration speech set the tone for his presidency (Abramson et al., 2017). The speech was dark and dystopian. He described American reality as “American Carnage.” The speech seemed to be directed only to his supporters. Almost immediately, some of his supporters began to say that Trump was sent by God. Many saw him as a street fighter who had their back in desperate times. Donald Trump managed only the thinnest veneer of religiosity. It has been said that evangelicals do not support Donald J. Trump in spite of his behavior but because of it.

Trump never missed an opportunity to curry favor with evangelicals. His promises included restoring Christmas, moving the U.S. embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. Trump also promised to overturn Roe v. Wade. He vowed to fill vacancies on the Supreme Court with card-carrying evangelicals. He would give Christian believers positions of authority in his administration. Pastor Robert Jeffress, lead pastor of a Baptist congregation in Dallas, Texas, one of the largest Baptist congregations in the United States, said "God intervened in our election and put Donald Trump in the Oval Office for a great purpose." (Mehta, 2017)

Franklin Graham, son of legendary evangelist Billy Graham, turned out to be one of Donald Trump's most loyal supporters. Graham said, "Never in my lifetime have we had a President of the United States willing

to take such a strong outspoken stand for the Christian faith like Donald Trump (Franklin Graham [@Franklin\_Graham], 2020)." It is quite ironic that Franklin's father, a man that had a huge impact on the evangelicals worldwide, had a radically different view. He said, "... the hard right has no interest in religion except to manipulate it." (Garcia, 2018)

### **EXCURSUS: KING CYRUS**

King Cyrus was a Persian ruler who, according to the Bible (Ezra, chapter 1) liberated the Jews from Babylonian captivity. Similarly, some evangelicals saw Trump as a flawed vessel chosen by God to achieve specific purposes even though his personal life and behavior diverged significantly from traditional piety. Lance Wallnau, a business consultant and self-styled doctor, was among the first to make the Trump-Cyrus connection. He claimed that the Lord spoke to him during the election period, leading him to draw this comparison (*TRUMP TELLS US MORE... – Lance Wallnau, 2015*). The association with Cyrus allowed evangelicals to justify their support for Trump, despite his unconventional lifestyle and political controversies. Just as Cyrus played a crucial role in Jewish history, some believed that Trump could serve as a vehicle for advancing their priorities.

### **A CHRISTIAN NATION**

A theocracy is a political system where divine authority or religious leaders play a central role in governing the state. Current theocracies include Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the Vatican. Christian nationalism has been a popular idea in parts of the evangelical church for a very long time. Many evangelicals would like the U.S. to be an explicitly Christian country, guided by Christian principles, with Christian leaders. Christian nationalism is strongly associated with Republican politics as well as a favorable view of Donald Trump. Republicans are more than twice as likely as independents and three times as likely as Democrats to hold Christian nationalist views (Axios [@axios], 2024). Christian nationalism is a response to a world moving away from faith. It is a response by a subset of evangelicals to America's growing racial and religious diversity. Many evangelicals, based on fears engendered by Fox News and the like, are convinced that Christian nationalism is a viable alternative for such a time as this.

Christian nationalists are typically in favor of restricting the immigration of non-Christian people to the U.S. They want government funding for separate schools. Christian nationalists believe that Trump is their best hope to keep their priorities in the forefront. Christian nationalism is an ideology of exclusion. Love of country has morphed into hostility to others – from community building to exclusion. Christian nationalism is a serious threat to the church and to the nation as well. Donald Trump is the evangelical's cudgel in the culture war. (Rosin, 2023) Christian nationalism as it is presently manifested in the U.S. rejects abortion. It is opposed to policies of diversity, equity, and inclusion. It advocates a proprietary interpretation of scripture. Most of its devotees do not have a problem with Christianity being a qualification for political office, which we have already seen during Trump's years in the White House. The Scopes trial in 1925 dealt with the teaching of evolution in public schools, evidence of a strong anti-intellectual streak. Book banning has already begun in some red states.

## **MEDIA MATTERS**

Early in his presidency, Donald Trump criticized CNN for what he said was biased coverage. He often referred to the network as “fake news.” During his presidency, there were several tense exchanges between Trump and CNN journalists during press conferences and interviews. Trump sometimes refused to take questions from CNN reporters, and when he did, he would say things like, “That’s a nasty question,” or “You’re a nasty person (The Hill [@thehill], 2023).” He did that sort of thing during his presidency, and carried on with the same attitude after he left office. All of this appears to have been a deliberate strategy, starting early in his term of office, with the goal of discouraging his followers from accessing news from mainstream news sources, encouraging them to access only outlets like Fox News which went out of their way to present him in a positive light. This is straight out of the authoritarian playbook, where governments routinely make generous use of disinformation to control their message. Fox News specializes in fomenting fears for political advantage. Its audience marinates in those fears hour after hour, day after day. When Fox News wants to change attitudes, it provides wall-to-wall coverage of an issue. And, more often than not, those attitudes do in fact change.

## **THE OUTRAGE MACHINE**

Social media allows users to be reader, writer, publisher, and armchair journalist all at the same time. Individuals with a sense of entitlement are more likely to endorse conspiracy theories. In times of great duress, evangelicals are drawn to apocalyptic scriptures such as Daniel in the Old Testament or the Book of Revelation in the New. Fearful individuals gravitate towards authoritarian leaders. Too many individuals, and not just evangelicals by any means, are willing to let others do their thinking for them. Magical thinking, conspiracy theories, science denial, openness to authoritarianism all come together in Christian nationalism. Social media is a gift to propagandists. It is currently the wild, wild west for attitude manipulators. Adding right-wing news to an uncritical population and further adding strong social pressures not to leave conservatism under any circumstances is a recipe for the kind of political reality we see in the U.S. currently. Social media platforms have a great deal of influence over the news that many people receive every day. Social media supercharges the worst parts of political discourse. The use of inflammatory language and moral outrage increases the number of shares, likes and followers. Research has shown that content on social media that arouses strong emotions spreads further, faster and more broadly than other news. (*Study*, 2018)

Many readers will see a headline and respond to it or share it without reading the article behind it. The most divisive posts are likely to garner the most attention. On social media people can say almost anything and spread all kinds of lies far and wide. A false story reaches 1,500 people six times quicker than a true story. Two types of information that catches our attention, given the way we’re built psychologically, are both novel and negative threats. The truth may have a running start, but inaccuracies more often than not win the race. (*Study*, 2018) Social media desperately needs government regulation, but no one is quite sure how to do that.

## CONSPIRACIES: STORIES ON STEROIDS

Conspiracies are essentially speculative explanations as to the causes of things, typically attributing them to covert plotting by malevolent parties. Conspiracies typically dispute the official narrative provided by authoritative sources, suggesting that powerful entities are covertly manipulating events for their own benefit. Conspiracy theories may provide a rationale for atypical behaviors such as refusing to wear a mask during a pandemic. During periods of crisis, conspiracies proliferate. Conspiracies are most effective when individuals refuse to fact check their claims. The Bible talks about zeal without knowledge (Romans 10:1-3). Zeal can be positive or negative, depending on the validity of the knowledge on which it is based.

## YOU'RE KILLING ME!

COVID-19 kicked the conspiracy ecosystem into high gear. Some argued that masks, vaccinations, and the like were part of a vast government conspiracy to persecute the church. During the pandemic, science denial became more than an academic, ivory tower concern. People were literally dying because they had chosen to listen to ideologues as opposed to scientific expertise. The White House briefings on the pandemic were cringeworthy. In the briefing room at the White House, scientific experts stood side by side with science deniers. Conflicts about science and religion are primarily about perceived status in a group, rather than evidence. Scientists were criticized for making changes on the fly, as new and updated evidence became available. Scientists must do a better job explaining how they do their work and that making changes in response to more accurate data is a strength not a weakness of science.

## CONCLUSION

In the last few years, the evangelical church has incurred a huge hit to its reputation. Evangelical wounds, unfortunately, are mostly self-inflicted. For many years, evangelicals condemned idolatry. That has changed as increasing numbers of evangelicals worship at the altar of political expediency. During the Trump presidency, the U.S. had a live preview of what Christian nationalism looks like. Electing Trump as president exposed a sickness that needs to be healed in American life and also in evangelicalism. Christian nationalism proposes the establishment of a religion-based kingdom. When Pontius Pilate asked Jesus about his kingdom, Jesus left no doubt: “My kingdom is not of this world.” (John 18:36) Recently, twenty-four thousand national church leaders signed a statement condemning Christian nationalism as a distortion of the gospel. (Burnett, 2022) Evangelicalism need not jettison its foundational principles but apply them in creative new ways. Mark Galli, senior editor of *Christianity Today*, an organization founded by Billy Graham, said this to fellow evangelicals:

*Remember who you are and whom you serve. Consider how your justification of Mr. Trump influences your witness to your Lord and Savior. Consider what an unbelieving world will say if you continue to brush off Mr. Trump's immoral words and behavior in the cause of political expediency. If we don't reverse course now, will anyone take anything we say about justice and righteousness with any seriousness for decades to come?(Galli, 2019)*

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