What is Christian Nationalism?

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By Allyson Carr, Justice Ministries

"You say 'Christian nationalism' like it's a bad thing," someone said to me recently. We had been speaking about the presence of hate symbols (such as the Confederate flag and the swastika) alongside Christian images at protests. A report called "Christian Nationalism at the January 6, 2021, Insurrection" had just been co-released by the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty as well as the Freedom from Religion Foundation—an odd pair to be collaborating, perhaps, but these are strange times. I confirmed that, yes, I had said "Christian nationalism" like it's a bad thing.

What is Christian nationalism? There are many definitions available but most of them have three common elements. The first one is believing that one's nation was explicitly founded on Christianity and should remain that way. The second element is believing that the nation should be governed by a set of selected "Christian" values (which conspicuously lack grounding in centrally important scriptural calls to love of neighbour or to demonstrating the fruits of the Spirit). The third one is believing that anything diverging from the narrow values it claims are "Christian" is a sure sign of the work of evil. These beliefs are often accompanied by the conviction that one's nation has a special role to play in God's plan and that if you are not explicitly "for" that plan, you are against it. (This is part of Christian nationalism's power—it portrays itself as specially anointed, pursuing a holier, more true form of Christianity.)

How “Christian” and “God’s plan” get defined in the ideology of Christian nationalism is important to unpack. The goals of Christian nationalism are political. In the words of one protestor at the Rolling Thunder rally in Ottawa this May, “We want this government removed by God and a righteous government put in place. The people in charge of this government are accountable to God,” (as cited in “Rolling Thunder Protest Winds Down as Ottawa Police Patrol Increasingly Empty Streets” by Maria Woolf, Global News, May 1, 2022). This sentiment is not isolated to a few people on the margins of one rally, either. At the “Freedom Convey” in Ottawa earlier this year, there was a “Jericho march” organized, to walk around parliament and “make the walls of parliament fall.”

The analogy with Jericho is instructive. Using an undeniably violent and destructive Biblical story as a focal point—when the walls of Jericho fell it wasn’t just Jericho’s government that was overthrown—says something about the goals of Christian nationalism and the methods it is prepared to use. To be fair, that was already on full display during the January 6 insurrection in the United States when people carrying Christian flags alongside racist hate symbols stormed the Capitol in the shadow of a gallows they had erected on the lawn. (Racism is a typical bedfellow of Christian nationalism, which is not to say that the rest of Christianity doesn’t struggle with it, too.)

In the Gospels, there were also people who thought Jesus came to overthrow or remove the government. The Roman state was, after all, occupying Jerusalem and the surrounding area. But the Gospels are clear: overthrowing a government—even one like Rome that explicitly included state worship of other gods and certainly was not acting in line with Jesus’ teachings—wasn’t what Jesus came to do. He was not interested in gaining and holding political power. This is not to say he didn’t speak to those in power. He certainly did. But he did not try to put a “righteous” government in place of the Roman government. He did not organize a Jericho-like march around Pilate’s palace. So we know that in the face of a government explicitly not in line with Jesus’ teaching, who actively worshipped other gods—even then Jesus did not work to bring the government down. There is a difference between trying to seize power and the lengthy Biblical prophetic tradition which calls power to account. To put it another way, Jesus didn’t preach in the beatitudes “blessed are those who use my name for political power, for they will rule and enforce my will.”

The emphasis on power— gaining it and keeping it—within Christian nationalism should make people familiar with the Gospels uncomfortable. Explicitly aligning Christianity (or any other faith, for that matter) with political power has never gone well. Conflating Christian and national identity dangerously labels other religions, as well as any Christians who don’t align with the values of Christian nationalism, as outside the nation’s identity and a threat to the nation itself. Under the influence of this narrative the stakes are set as a conflict over the nation’s soul and very existence; a battle of good vs evil that can become all too literal.

After the January 6, 2021, insurrection in the United States and the Christian imagery that

was present during it, I wrote an article for this newspaper. It said in closing, “The way to prevent violence like this is not when it has come to a head, but all along, each week, each day, speaking love, living love…and through learning how to be community, how to be neighbours. That is what it takes in the long haul, and we need those things, as so many people have been saying louder than me for so many years. But, given what happened [on January 6] we also now need to ask ourselves, when a mob comes claiming the right to political power and violence in God’s name, under the Christian banner, how will the wider church respond?”

This question is not rhetorical. It is happening here in Canada. One can’t invoke the story of Jericho and call what you’re doing peaceful, as anyone who has read the book of Joshua knows. The church acknowledges that all that the church says, does, and is silent on stands as a public witness to how the body of Christ lives and acts, and what it desires for the world. What is the church saying about Christian nationalism? What are Christians saying? The question is before us, and we are asked to respond.