

Christ Before Pilate  
John 18:33–38a  
Sunday, November 27, 2024

Let us pray: Let us hear your voice, Lord, so that we might know what is true and live in your kingdom, in Christ. Amen.

This past week, Tony Campolo died. Campolo was a pastor, author, professor, and sociologist who lived in this area and taught at Eastern University. He spoke here at St. John's maybe 12 years ago. He was an evangelical Baptist, but not in the way that evangelicals are typically presented in the media today. He served as the spiritual advisor to Bill Clinton when he was president, and he spent decades trying to convince other evangelicals that their faith should motivate them to address issues of social justice like poverty, hunger, discrimination, and injustice. He was in this unique position where he had credibility with both conservatives and liberals and could engage with all of them (although some liberals said he was too conservative, and some conservatives said he was too liberal). He was a *very* important voice in the church because he bridged those two worlds.

But Campolo might be best known by many people for this quote. He frequently said, "Mixing religion and politics is like mixing ice cream and horse manure. It doesn't hurt the manure, but it sure does ruin the ice cream." And that from someone who advised a president! But today is a day that religion and politics collide. Today is Christ the King Sunday, the last day of the liturgical calendar, the culmination of the Christian year, when we celebrate that Jesus Christ is the King of kings and Lord of lords who rules and reigns over heaven and earth. This is a holy day that finds its origins not in *scripture* but in *politics*.

Christ the King Sunday is a relatively new holy day in the life of the church. It started in 1925. The world (especially Europe) was rebuilding after the end of WWI. Fascism was starting to spread; Hitler, Mussolini, and Stalin were on the rise, taking political power away from the church in Europe. And the extravagance of the 1920s was off and running. There was a huge shift in what it meant to be powerful and wealthy.

In the midst of all of this, Pope Pius XI wanted to remind Christians that their allegiance was to God, as opposed to earthly rulers and wealth. So he issued what was called the Quas Primas, establishing the Feast of Christ the King. He created a new holy day as a response to the destructive political and social forces of his time; as a reminder that Jesus Christ and the Church he created are not subject to any external force, and that the only way to combat the abuses of power and wealth around us was to acknowledge the lordship of Jesus Christ in the world and in our lives.

But what does that look like, to live in this world with Christ as our king? Because at one extreme, it could look like not engaging with the political process at all because I serve Christ alone, and so I have no use for worldly politics. And at the other extreme, it could look like *fusing* faith and government, because if Christ is king and rules over heaven and earth, then earthly laws must reflect Christ's will. There is a name for that, and you've probably heard it in the news lately. How many of you have heard the term *Christian Nationalism*? How many of you feel like you have a good understanding of what Christian Nationalism *is*?

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Let's start by saying what it is *not*. Christian Nationalism is not just about being patriotic. You can be a Christian and be patriotic. You can be a Christian and love America. We live in a country that affords us the freedom to gather here to worship without fear that someone is going

to kick the door in and arrest us. Many other Christians around the world do *not* have that same freedom. It's a gift, and we should not take it for granted. People gave their lives to ensure that freedom for us. And if someone says, "America is a Christian nation," that does *not* automatically make them a Christian Nationalist, because there are a lot of different things that can mean.

Christian Nationalism is *not* evangelicalism. A lot of people want to point to conservative evangelical Christians and paint them all as Christian Nationalists. That is absolutely not the case. Many white American evangelicals *do* identify as Christian Nationalists (not *most* but *many*, and more than any other group of Christians does), but there are plenty of evangelicals who do *not*. There are plenty of evangelicals who are speaking out *against* Christian Nationalism. There are Christian Nationalists who are Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox. There are Christian Nationalists who are black and Latino. It transcends one particular denomination or group.

And Christian Nationalism is not just "what I disagree with or don't like." If I see a Christian politician that I disagree with, I can't just say, "Christian Nationalist." And if I see a church engaging in political practices that I don't like, I can't just call *them* Christian Nationalists. That's like people who call every liberal a Communist and every conservative a Nazi. It's just not true, it hurts more than it helps, and more often than not it's just a scare tactic.

So what *is* Christian Nationalism? Andrew Whitehead is a sociologist who teaches at Indiana University – Purdue University Indianapolis. He grew up in the evangelical church and is now one of the leading experts on Christian Nationalism in America. He has written two books on it, one primarily as a sociologist and one primarily as a Christian. And Whitehead defines Christian

Nationalism as, “a cultural framework that idealizes and advocates for a fusion of a particular expression of Christianity with American civic life. It holds that this version of Christianity should be the principal and undisputed cultural framework in the United States, and that the government should vigorously preserve that cultural framework.”<sup>1</sup> Basically, he’s saying that Christian Nationalism wants a particular kind of Christianity to be the center of American life, and that the government should make that happen.

Now, this is not just saying that our faith should guide our politics, which I think a lot of people would agree with. That if our faith in Jesus Christ is the center of our lives, then it should guide how we live and vote and participate in civic life. Nothing wrong with that. And it’s not even saying that America wasn’t built on Judeo-Christian values. What Christian Nationalism says is that to be American is to be Christian and to be Christian is to be American. And it is more about political power than it is about actual faith. Christian Nationalism uses religion to achieve a political purpose. It’s like politics wrapped up in a cloak of religion; a wolf in sheep’s clothing.

The Christianity that Christian Nationalism wants to institute is primarily white, straight, male-dominated, and nativist (or that of native-born Americans, rather than immigrants). Morally, it is very traditional, based on creating and sustaining social hierarchies, specifically around gender and sexuality (men are at the top). It is comfortable with authoritarian social control and the use of violence. There are strands of it that believe Christians must aspire to total control of the seven spheres of influence over American culture: media, education, family, religion, arts and entertainment, the economy, and the government; Christians should control *all* of that.

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Whitehead, *American Idolatry: How Christian Nationalism Betrays the Gospel and Threatens the Church*. Pg. 28-29.

And Christian Nationalism is highly apocalyptic, focused on the end of times. The reason they want to *do* all of this is because they believe it will usher in Christ's return. And the reason Christian Nationalists support Israel is *not* because they care about the Jewish people. It is because they believe that what is happening in the Middle East right now will lead to an apocalyptic war that will result in the *death* of most, if not all, of the Jewish people and bring about Christ's return. That is the part they're not saying out loud, but that is the theology behind all of this. It is based on a total misunderstanding of the book of Revelation.

But here's the best description I've found of it. Pastor and author Benjamin Cremer says that "Christian Nationalism replaces the worship of Jesus with the worship of political power. [It is] accepting Satan's temptation of Jesus, when he showed him all the kingdoms of the world and said, 'All this I will give to you, if you will bow down and worship me.'" Christian Nationalism says, "Deal." It's like when Jesus said, "What will it profit you if you gain the whole world but forfeit your soul?" Christian Nationalism says, "Well, we gain the whole world!" It is about *power in this world for a specific group of people.*

And that is the very antithesis of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

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I could quote you verse after verse where Jesus shuns worldly power and calls his followers to do the same. Where he says, "The one who wants to be *greatest* among you must be *servant of all.*" "The last shall be first, and the first shall be last." But the lectionary reading for today is this story from John's gospel of Jesus before Pilate. Jesus has been arrested by the Jewish religious leaders and handed over to the Romans. And now Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of southern Israel, is questioning Jesus to see if these charges against him are valid.

He asks Jesus, “Are you the King of the Jews?” Because there can only be *one* king, and that is Caesar. Jesus’ response to this is, “My kingdom is not of this world. If it *were*, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over. But they *aren’t*, because my kingdom is not from here.”

Some of Jesus’ followers thought it was *supposed* to be. When Jesus arrived in Jerusalem just a few days before this, he is greeted by crowds waving palm branches and shouting, “Hosanna! Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!” They are reenacting the enthronement of a king, as it was done in the Old Testament. They think that the Messiah is going to be a real king who sits on a real throne and raises up an army to defeat the Romans. And his disciples are repeatedly asking him, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel; when you will give us control of our country back?” And to *all of that*, Jesus says, “My kingdom is not of this world.” Jesus resists every temptation to worldly power, and he calls his followers to do the same.

I heard someone say recently, in response to Christian Nationalism, “If Jesus had wanted to establish a Christian nation, he *would have*. But he *didn’t*.” Now, that is *different* than saying that our country is established on the core principals of faith. I would *love* to see a Christian nation that is actually *based* on the teachings of Christ – mercy, justice, love of neighbor, caring for the poor and the hungry and the sick. That is the kind of nation in which *all people*, not just Christians, would thrive. But that is not what Christian Nationalism seeks. It seeks to enforce a very rigid understanding of Christianity. And if Jesus had wanted to establish *that* kind of nation, he would have. But he didn’t.

As followers of Jesus Christ, we need to make sure that we are basing our politics on our faith in Jesus, and not basing our faith in Jesus on our politics. And when we see Christian Nationalism rearing its head among us, we need to be able to say, “That is wrong. It is based on a false understanding of faith. It is a betrayal of the gospel. It makes an idol out of power. That is not who we are called to be as followers of Christ.”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German pastor, theologian, and author in the 1920s and 30s, and he faced his own kind of Christian Nationalism, as Hitler and the Nazis coopted the German church in order to consolidate their power. And there were a lot of Christians who supported that. Because it *feels good* to think that *our way* is the *right way*. It feels *good* to have *power*. But Bonhoeffer said, “The Church is the Church only when it exists for others...not dominating, but helping and serving. It must tell men (and women) of every calling what it means to live for Christ, to exist for others.” And the way we *tell* them that is by *doing it ourselves*. Helping, serving, existing for others. The way that we help people come to faith in Jesus is by *showing them Jesus*, in our words and actions and love and forgiveness, in caring for the poor and the oppressed; not by *hurting* others, but by bringing about *healing* and *new life*, as Christ did.

You cannot *enforce* faith. You cannot *legislate* it. Faith in Jesus Christ is based on love and gratitude for what Christ has done for us. Christ died for the forgiveness of our sin and rose from the dead so that we could live forever with him. And faith is saying, “I am so overwhelmed and grateful for that gift, which I have done nothing to deserve or earn, that I want to live my life for you.” And the way that we live our lives for Christ is by giving ourselves in love and service to the world, as Christ did for us. It is not by building ourselves up with power but by humbling ourselves, being broken and poured out for the world, as Christ was.

Jesus Christ *is* the King of kings and Lord of lords who rules and reigns over heaven and earth. But Christ is *not* the kind of king who lords power over others and forces them to obey his will. His lordship is humble. It is based in loving and serving others. He gave himself to that to the point of death on a cross. And he wants our service *to* him to be motivated by our deep love *for* him. *That* is what it looks like to live in this world with Christ as our king. Not to enforce Christian principles through government, but to go *against* the grain of the world by showing them a *different* kind of power, a *different* kind of kingdom, one borne out of mercy and compassion and service and love. Our calling is to show the world that a *different* kind of world is possible.

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This story of Jesus and Pilate ends with Pilate asking a question. *What is truth?* Jesus never answers that. He *could* have and laid out for Pilate and for us exactly what *truth* is. But he doesn't. That question is just left hanging there. Because, ultimately, it's not a question for Jesus. It's a question for *us*. Because we live in a time when truth is in doubt. We seem to have lost our ability to tell what is true and what is a lie. If we like it or agree with it, it's true, but if we don't, it's a lie. And just as Christ stood before Pilate, this embodiment of worldly power, so *we* now stand before Pilate and face the same question. *What is truth?*

And the way we *know* that is by listening to Jesus' voice. He says, "Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." We know what is true by listening to Jesus. And what does he tell us? "My kingdom is not of this world." There is more to life than power and possessions and the things of this world. *That* is truth. He tells us to humble ourselves and serve others. *That* is truth. He tells us to love. Truth is found in love. In caring for others, showing mercy to others, forgiving others, making sure that everyone has what they need to live the fullness of life. You



want a Christian nation? Start by doing *that*. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.