The Dangers of Christian Nationalism in the United States: A Policy Statement of the National Council of Churches

The contemporary ideology, Christian nationalism, is of great concern to the members of the National Council of Churches and, indeed, to all Americans who are committed to justice and peace. Christian nationalism is one form of religious nationalism. The dangers posed by religious nationalisms in other parts of the world are also of concern, but examining them is beyond the scope of this statement. Our first responsibility is to address that version which poses the primary threat within our own nation.

From the foundation of the United States, Christian nationalism has traditionally employed images that advocate an idealized view of the nation's identity and mission, while deliberately ignoring those persons who have been excluded, exploited, and persecuted, such as Native Americans, enslaved African Americans and their descendants, and a cascading procession of others, including, e.g., the Irish in the 1840s-50s, Chinese in the 1880s, Italians in the early 1900s, Jews in the 1930s, and Muslims in the 2000s and following. From its beginnings, the Christian nationalist movement has endorsed American exceptionalism, the idea that the U.S. is more righteous and upright than other nations, but during the last sixty years a significant number of Christian nationalists have become increasingly partisan, divisive, ideological, and militant. Christian symbols have been misappropriated, emptied of their profound meaning, and invoked to support idolatrous loyalty to the nation. For some Americans, the familiarity of the themes that Christian nationalism celebrates can obscure its true character and intentions. Nevertheless, because of the danger that it poses to our country today, identifying and consciously abjuring its malignant outlook is vitally important.

Christian nationalism is characterized by the following religious affirmations:

- that the United States was founded as a Christian nation;
- that America is exceptional. That is, God has given the United States particular blessings and privileges not available to people in other countries, and the nation must remain Christian in order for those blessings to continue;
- that only Christians are the proper custodians of this nation's heritage;
- that Christianity (or a particular form of Christianity) should have privileged status in the United States, particularly in matters of law and political policy;
- that, even when their presence is tolerated, people who practice other religions or none cannot be fully American — they are not welcomed, their voices are discounted, and they are not to be trusted with political and cultural leadership;
- that Christians in general and some Christians in particular should enjoy a level of legal protection not granted to those who practice other religions; and,that Christians have been made to suffer unjustly, leaving them no alternative but to respond with revolutionary zeal to preserve the United States as a great Christian nation.

The Christian nationalist movement is largely white, reflecting the long entanglement of nationalism and racism that is our collective inheritance since the earliest days of America's colonial settlement. In white nationalism this history is sanitized, removing the sins of genocide, slavery, Jim Crow laws, and all the many ways in which racism has saturated and sustained our society, thereby removing any felt need for repentance or repair

Theologically, Christian nationalism elevates the nation, or a particular concept of the nation, to a role closely aligned with God. In its more militant forms, Christian nationalism encourages its adherents to believe they are battling the forces of darkness on all fronts, but this combative outlook actually grows out of fealty to symbols and champions unaffiliated with historic Christianity. This mindset of embattled righteousness is applied to the perceived enemies of the state (e.g., liberals, humanists, pluralists, atheists, and various minority communities), and true believers are directed to employ any and all means, even undemocratic and violent ones, in order to win political contests. In this quest for political power, Christian humility is lost, as is the message of God's love for all humanity.

Christian nationalists claim a dedication to a "biblical worldview," **but their understanding of that worldview is in multiple ways contrary to the actual witness of the Bible.** Where the Bible has at its core the story of a people committed to welcoming aliens and strangers because they themselves were aliens and strangers, and to defending the oppressed because they themselves were once oppressed, the Christian nationalist narrative rejects the stranger and judges the oppressed as deserving of their oppression. Where the Bible declares that all human beings are made in the image of God, American Christian nationalists regard only certain people — "advanced," white, Christian, English-speaking — to have the full measure of God's image. Where the Great Commandment (Mt, 22: 35-40 and parallels) enjoins us to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind, and our neighbors as ourselves, Christian nationalists choose to narrow who is considered an American, to love only certain neighbors, and to regard others as enemies to be defeated, deported, or destroyed. Where Christ affirmed that "my kingdom is not of this world" (Jn. 18:36), Christian nationalists have equated the Kingdom of God with their vision of America.

Morally, Christian nationalism gives little attention to structural issues of poverty, racism, the healing of our planet, and international peace, thereby undermining justice and causing great harm. This results in individual manifestations of Christian nationalism that negatively affect persons and communities of color. Indeed, when it is particularly identified as white Christian nationalism, it is counter to the holy, spiritual impulse of Black communities that seek healing and the acknowledgment of wholeness that have been denied them by historic, and often violent, experiences of Christian nationalism.

Many Christian nationalists have also cast their lot with conspiracy theories and falsehoods that serve to create imaginary demons and predators. They conjure plots designed to inspire their followers to aggressive and sometimes violent assaults on people of good will who hold a different perspective. By contrast, genuine morality must be rooted in a clear-minded devotion to truth, including an accurate understanding of our history, our failings as well as our successes. Jesus prayed to God that all may be "sanctified by truth" (Jn 17:17). Sanctification comes through a humble, willing submission to the witness of God's spirit, which in turn enables a bold acknowledgment of the truth. In the United States today, the truth to be acknowledged includes genocide, expansionism, slavery, racism, economic inequality, and the exploitation of our natural resources for the benefit of a few, the injury of many, and climatic peril for all. Similarly, morality with a wider lens will question our nation's imperialistic

undertakings abroad – undertakings that grow out of an exalted sense of American influence and bring harm to neighbors in other regions of the world.

The alternative to Christian nationalism, however, is not disengagement from politics, but a willingness to work in the public realm and to cross over political, social, economic, and religious boundaries in order to discern and foster the common good for all people in this nation and the world. Christians are called both to support the government of the United States insofar as it serves this beneficent goal and to work diligently for reforms wherever and whenever it does not. We are called to give thanks for the gifts God has channeled to us through this nation and to confess our complicity in this nation's moral failings.

To assume that "religion and politics are separate" is to leave the future of the nation in the hands of zealous ideologues and those with privilege and power. Injustices are thereby ignored. But to assume that Christianity mandates a particular political agenda is to overstep constitutional bounds and to claim divine sanction for the priorities of a few. Once again, injustices are ignored. As so many social reform movements in the history of the United States have demonstrated, religious communities, at their best, can provide the moral witness needed to achieve beneficial change. In order for Christians to exercise this leadership, however, they need to model, educate, and advocate for their goals, not simply control or manipulate their adversaries.

Christians of good faith, dedicated to the good news of Jesus and to the principles of love, hope, and justice, bring a vision of inclusion, justice, peace, and unity to the table. Peoples of all creeds, kinds, and convictions can be part of the work of creating a just society — one that treasures the distinctiveness of each individual and the intrinsic value of all.

While the word "nationalism" involves claims made about the unique features of one's country, patriotism represents a dedication to its interests and to its character, purpose, and values. As such, patriotism can be either constructive or malignant, and the question is not whether we espouse some form of it, but what vision of the nation, including both its achievements and failures, shapes our work and commitments. Christians are called to a public witness that serves God by seeking to shape our nation according to the vision of the Kingdom of God, knowing that God's vision recognizes no border or clan. Focusing on the Kingdom, we are charged to recover the uncomfortable truths of our past history, and, as loving critics and critical lovers of our country, to chart the path to a different and shared future.

In accordance with our nation's promise of religious freedom and its practice of religious pluralism, the National Council of Churches pledges to welcome, to respect, and to cooperate as partners with those who practice other religions and hold other world views, and are committed to the common good. Supporting their full participation in our society and equal access to its opportunities, the NCC therefore unconditionally condemns the teaching and objectives of the contemporary Christian nationalist movement.

The bonds of our democracy are now fragile and frayed. We bring to our faith the task of strengthening the polity that enables love to prevail. In so doing we follow Paul's counsel to pursue "whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is beautiful, whatever is gracious" (Phil 4:8).

As we challenge Christian nationalism in the U.S., we also recognize the influence of various forms of religious nationalism in some other countries. We stand ready to join with our colleagues in other religious communities and other settings to explore the impact of such religious nationalisms on societal resilience, religious minorities, domestic well-being, and international peace.

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