



The Church and America

A Stonegate Workshop

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A. What Was God's Purpose for America?

For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us. So that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken, and so cause him to withdraw his present help from us, we shall be made a story and a by-word through the world. We shall open the mouths of enemies to speak evil of the ways of God, and all professors for God's sake. We shall shame the faces of many of God's worthy servants, and cause their prayers to be turned into curses upon us till we be consumed out of the good land whither we are a going. — John Winthrop, Governor of Massachusetts Bay Colony, 1630.¹

1. The Puritan Vision

- To establish an explicitly *Christian* Commonwealth
- This Christian commonwealth would be different than the Church of England
 - No notion of “The Divine Right of Kings?”
 - Would be built upon “the true precepts of God.”
- Religious *Freedom* meant the freedom to organize life without the Church of England

“The Puritans were assured that they alone knew the exact truth, as it was contained in the written word of God, and they were fighting to enthrone it in England...When they could not succeed at home, they came to America, where they could establish a society in which **the one and only truth should reign forever.**” — Perry Miller²

- The Puritans believed God had a unique purpose(s) for America:
 - *Establish* a pure society of Christ-followers who applied the teachings of Scripture to all areas of life.
 - *Example* of Christian purity and faithfulness to other nations
 - *Exclude* the practice of anything they deemed to be a false religion.
- The Puritans wanted to leave one state church in England to establish a new—and *true*—*state church* in America.

The Pilgrims and Puritans did come seeking religious freedom, but only for themselves. They didn't value or allow religious freedom for others...In fact, the Rhode Island colony was founded by dissidents forced out of Massachusetts Bay because of religious nonconformity. Far from guaranteeing “complete tolerance,” all the way through the Founding era non-Christian religious groups and some Christian denominations were discriminated against in most of the colonies/states, and even persecuted in some. That persecution was, for example, what motivated James Madison and Thomas Jefferson to push for religious tolerance legislation. — Gregg L. Frazer³

¹ Document: “A Model of Christian Charity,” accessed online at teachingamericanhistory.org

² *Errand Into the Wilderness*, 144.

³ “A Republic if You Can Keep It,” *The Gospel Coalition*, June 6, 2016. A book review of Eric Metaxas' *If You Can Keep it*,

- A Key Concept: *Covenant*
 - A covenant with **each other**: to live in a tight-knit community under the authority of Scripture.
 - A Covenant with **God**: they believed they were part of a new chosen people called by God to establish a society based on His Word.
- Important: There was no modern notion of *Religious Liberty* in this vision.

The Puritan colonies of New England were exercising freedom to leave England and worship God on their own terms in America. They were not, however, established their own colonies wherein everyone would be free to worship as they chose...The goal was to form a pure society, one that integrated biblical theology into all areas of life and grounded in the idea of covenant.

Religion and the State were knit together based on the idea that they had entered into a covenant with God, one not unlike that describe in the OT between ancient Israel and God...New England would be a Christian nation in every respect, because it's people were supposed to be, on the whole, regenerate['saved']. — John Wilsey⁴

In England, Puritans had attempted to reform the lives of individuals, the practice of the national English church, and the structures of English society...The restoration of the monarchy in 1660 ended Puritan efforts at creating the kind of comprehensive Christian society their Protestant understanding of Scripture demanded. It was different in the New World...The "Puritan Experiment" tested whether consistent Reformation Protestantism could flourish in an environment with external enemies removed.

In New England, these leaders translated their aspirations into reality by constructing a society governed by a comprehensive theology of *covenant*.

By the early 18th century, New England Puritanism was fading as a comprehensive way of life. As that century developed, widespread economic and intellectual change, quarrels among the churches, and the entrance of political ideas that would later be called "democratic" and "republican" undercut the interlocking power of the covenants. Even so, Puritan traits of earnestness, religious dedication to tasks, and moral seriousness remained alive as powerful influences in New England and much of the United States. — Mark Noll⁵

"American colonists framed their local military clashes as part of a global struggle between Catholics and the Protestant Interest... 'Scarlet whore' and 'Antichrist' were common biblical epithets that Protestants assigned to the Catholic Church." — Thomas Kidd⁶

⁴ *One Nation Under God?* 5, 9.

⁵ *The Old Religion in a New World*, 37–38, 41.

⁶*America's Religious History*, 46.

Question #1: How Long did this Vision Last?

Two Significant Movements

- The Great *Awakening* (America: 1730–1750)
- The English *Enlightenment* (Europe: 16th–18th century)

The Great Awakening

- Look Up: George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards
- Massive Summary: the Great Awakening introduced *choice* into the American religious experience.
- Witnessed the birth of *Denominations* in America (i.e. Congregationalists, Baptists, Methodists, etc.)
- Introduced the necessity of religious *freedom* (in the modern sense)

The English Enlightenment

- Look up: John Locke, Isaac Newton, Francis Bacon.
- Significant intellectual advances in mathematics, science, and philosophy.
- Revolutionized how people viewed the roll of *reason*

The Roll of Reason

- Previously: reason was a useful *supplement* to faith. (never permitted to question or challenge church authorities or church doctrine)
- Afterward: reason became a useful *replacement* to faith. (questioning and challenging church authorities and doctrine was now seen as important and necessary).

A Massive Shift

- For the first time people began to think:
 - Reality can be known *without* appeal to church authority
 - Societies could be organized around *philosophical* principles instead of church doctrines.
 - The church is *useful* for moral instruction, but it is not *ultimate* for governing societies.

From opposite ends of the ideological spectrum—the upsurge of Calvinist piety known as the Great Awakening and increasing American attachment to ideals of the European Enlightenment—came growing support for principles of toleration and religious freedom. — Mark Noll.⁷

⁷ *The Old Religion in a New World*, 77–78.

Question #2: Did the Founders Seek to Establish a Christian Nation?

- No

“Congress shall make no law respecting *an establishment of religion* or prohibiting the free exercise thereof...” — The First Amendment.

2. The Founding Vision

- Socially America was very Christian in its practice.
- Many of the Founders valued religion for its ability to make people moral and virtuous.

Both the founding fathers and major Protestant spokesman appealed for the churches to strengthen the moral character required for a republican government. Writers and speakers regularly appealed to the slippery term “virtue” to make this argument....Americans...held that “virtue” in the citizenry was required to preserve liberty, to restrain the natural tendency of governmental power to expand, and to make the checks and balances of the Constitution actually work for the well being of society. — Mark Noll⁸

Reason and experience forbid us to expect that National morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle. — George Washington⁹

- Politically no religion was to be established

The Senators and Representatives before mentioned, and the Members of the several State Legislatures, and all executive and judicial Officers, both of the United States and of the several States, shall be bound by Oath or Affirmation, to support this Constitution; but **no religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust under the United States.** — Article VI

- The Founding Vision was to enshrine religious freedom, but not a uniquely Christian state.¹⁰
- The Founders believed the state couldn't compel religion, because religious belief was a matter of conscience—not *compulsion*.
- The founders even opposed attempts to enshrine religion in state law (i.e. Patrick Henry, Virginia in 1785).

⁸ *The Old Religion in a New World*, 86.

⁹ Letter to Clergy of Different Denominations Residing in and near the city of Philadelphia, March 3, 1797.

¹⁰ For those interested in considering the actual beliefs of the Founding Fathers, please consider reading John Fea's *Was America Founded as a Christian Nation?* or Gregg Frazer's book *The Religious Beliefs of the Founding Fathers*. For critical interaction with individuals like David Barton who advocate the Christian America thesis, see “Justin Taylor, “Thomas Nelson Ceases Publication of David Barton's Error-Ridden Book on Jefferson's Faith,” *The Gospel Coalition*, August 9, 2012; Justin Taylor, “Christian History: How David Barton Is Doing It Wrong,” *The Gospel Coalition*, May 2017; Thomas Kidd, “Thomas Jefferson's Faith,” *Faith and History*, July 1, 2016.

The Founders were not attempting to do the same thing as the Puritans. **They were not seeking to create a Christian state.** They realized that to do such a thing would be to step backward into the premodern world, when they knew they were introducing a form of society that was different than any which preceded them...While the Puritans may have seen themselves as a new Israel establishing a theologically pure society, **the Founders had no such notion in mind.** — John Wilsey¹¹

The experience of the colonial and Revolutionary periods created the following situation in the early United States: The national government would have no formal connections with religious institutions. yet in the individual states, various arrangements existed that privileged a single Protestant denomination or the beliefs of a generic Protestantism...At the start of the national period, “no establishment” meant not having the church-state situation that Southern Anglicans and New England Congregationalists had once enjoyed. “Religious Liberty” meant several things: for almost all Protestants it meant the negative freedom of worshipping as one pleased, but for many of the states it also meant a positive freedom to restrict the rights of non-Protestants or non-Christians. [Between 1776 and 1789], the U.S. Congress itself entertained proposals for a wide range of practical procedures to encourage religion without setting up a European style church establishment. —Mark Noll¹²

Though there could be some exceptions, Jefferson believed that religion was a private matters that should remain free of government interference. This was the kind of separation of church and state he affirmed in writing the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom. While...Jefferson would have certainly wished that states such as Massachusetts or Connecticut also embraced this kind of religious liberty, he realized that any attempt to interfere with their religious establishments was outside the jurisdiction of the national government and thus in violation of the Constitution. — John Fea¹³

Well aware that the opinions and belief of men depend not on their own will, but follow involuntarily the evidence proposed to their minds; that Almighty God hath created the mind free, and manifested his supreme will that free it shall remain by making it altogether insusceptible of restraint; that all attempts to influence it by temporal punishments, or burthens, or by civil incapacitations, tend only to beget habits of hypocrisy and meanness, and are a departure from the plan of the holy author of our religion... — Thomas Jefferson¹⁴

In matters of religion, I have considered that its free exercise is placed by the constitution independent of the powers of the general government. I have therefore undertaken, on no occasion, to prescribe the religious exercises suited to it, but have left them, as the constitution found them, under the direction and discipline of State and Church authorities, acknowledged by several religious societies. — Thomas Jefferson¹⁵

¹¹ Ibid. 42.

¹² *The Old Religion in a New World*, 82–83.

¹³ *Was America Founded as a Christian Nation?* 167.

¹⁴ "A Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom", Section I

¹⁵ Second inaugural Address, March 4, 1805, accessed at Yale Law School Avalon Project.

God's Purpose at the Founding

- We must *distinguish* between the Puritan Vision and the Founders Vision
- We must recognize the *multiple* influences at work on the Founders thinking (i.e. The Bible, the Great Awakening, the Enlightenment, etc.)
- We must tell ourselves the *correct story*. Otherwise, may seek to reclaim something that was never there.

The impulse to write history and organize our world around stories is intrinsic to us as human beings. We are, at our core, remembering and story-making creatures, and stories are one of the chief ways we find meaning in the flow of events. What we call “history” and “literature” are merely the refinement and intensification of that basic human impulse, that need.

Historical consciousness is to civilized society what memory is to individual identity. Without memory, and without the stories by which our memories are carried forward, we cannot say who, or what, we are. Without them, our life and thought dissolve into a meaningless, unrelated rush of events.

A culture without memory will necessarily be barbarous and easily tyrannized, even if it is technologically advanced. The incessant waves of daily events will occupy all our attention and defeat our efforts to connect past, present, and future, thereby diverting us from an understanding of the human things that unfold in time, including the paths of our own lives. — Wilfred McClay¹⁶

¹⁶ *Land of Hope*, xi–xii

B. What *is* God's Purpose for America Today? | Two Questions:

1. Is American a uniquely *chosen* nation?
2. Does God have a unique *commission* for America?

Question #1: A Chosen Nation?

"If **my people**, who are called by **my name**, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal **their land**." — 2 Chronicles 7:14

Some Questions We Need to Ask:

1. When was this written? OT or NT?
2. Who are "my people"?
3. When did God call America by His name?
4. What land is God referring to?

This verse is talking about *Israel*, not *America*.

- **Question:** Does God even have a chosen nation today?
- **Answer:** *No* — God does *not* have a geographic or ethnic people He has chosen.
- Instead, God has chosen people from "*every* tribe, tongue, and nation" (Revelation 7:9) through His Son — Jesus.
- God's chosen people is the *Church*, not America.

But you are **a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his possession, so that you may proclaim the praises** of the one who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. **10** Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. — 1 Peter 2:9–10

"My kingdom is not of this world," said Jesus. "If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would fight, so that I wouldn't be handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here." — John 18:26

You did not choose me, but I chose you. I appointed you to go and produce fruit and that your fruit should remain, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he will give you. **17** "This is what I command you: Love one another. **18** "If the world hates you, understand that it hated me before it hated you. **19** If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own. However, because you are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of it, the world hates you. — John 15:15–19

For he chose us in him, before the foundation of the world, to be holy and blameless in love before him — Ephesians 1:4 (cf. Colossians 3:12–13)

Question #2: A Commissioned Nation?

Some Very Important Context:

- The *Wars* America fought in the 20th century deeply shaped our collective religious conscience.
- The 20th century embedded some deeply religious language, symbols, and self-understanding for many Americans.

Three Significant Wars

- World War 1 (1914–1918)
- World War 2 (1939–1945)
- The *Cold* War (1947–1991).

This is the time of all others when Democracy should prove its purity and its **spiritual power** to prevail. It is surely the **manifest destiny** of the United States to lead in the attempt to make this spirit prevail. — Woodrow Wilson¹⁷

Jesus told the disciples to go out into all the world and preach the gospel to all nations....[The Founders] created a society of material, intellectual, and spiritual richness the like of which the world had never known...[The American people] availed of every opportunity to **spread their gospel of freedom**, their **good news**, throughout the world. — John Foster Dulles¹⁸

During the Cold War, this responsibility [of protecting freedom around the world] meant pursuing a policy of containment of godless communism. Now, after communism collapse America nationalists have had to find a new purpose to animate their country's overseas efforts, and this may have been provided in the ongoing fight against terrorism. — David Koyzis¹⁹

¹⁷ Message to Congress, 1920.

¹⁸ "The Power of Moral Forces," 1953.

¹⁹ *Political Visions and Illusions*, 117.

Language, Symbols, and Self Understanding

- **Question:** when was the phrase “Under God” placed in the Pledge of Allegiance?
- **Answer:** 1954

“We are affirming ***the transcendence of religious faith in America’s heritage and future***; in this way we shall constantly strengthen ***those spiritual weapons*** which forever will be our country’s most powerful resources, in peace or in war.” — President Dwight D. Eisenhower, June 14 1954.

This is an example of American Civil Religion.

A similar story is true with “In God We Trust” being printed on American paper currency. This didn’t occur until 1957 after Congress changed the phrase from “E Pluribus Unum” to “In God We Trust” on the 1-dollar bill. Prior to this, the phrase “In God we Trust” appeared on the two-cent piece in 1864, the five-cent coin in 1883, the one-cent coin in 1909, the ten cent coin in 1916, and the Jefferson nickel in 1938, but it was not a widespread utilized for American *paper* currency until 1957.²⁰

Civil Religion

- Civil religion is the use of religious language, symbols, and customs for national purposes.
- It unifies people around religious elements in order to strengthen a sense of national unity and purpose.
- An overarching theme during the War Years: Good vs. Evil = America vs. _____
- When this happens, we must always ask: is this Biblical?

The idea that America has been set aside by God to fulfill a special destiny dates back to the formation of the first American colonies in the seventeenth century. But believers in America’s national mission enlarged this notion to a global scale during the twentieth century, particularly World War II (1939–1945). — John Wilsey²¹

Where there is theological certainty in the absence of specific divine revelation, problems abound...When it comes to drawing wisdom from the past, we must be careful to discern between making normative moral judgments based on history and reflecting morally on history... Moral judgments based on history are problematic...because they require obedience to history where no divine mandate to do so exists. History is not authoritative, so drawing normative moral lessons from a past golden age of national history is not only unwise; it undermines the authority of Scripture by neglecting it and replacing it with another authority. It also places the person making the moral judgment in an artificially privileged position, so that with the Pharisee he demands others be subject to an extra biblical source of authority arising from his own selfish motivations. — John Wilsey²²

²⁰ The United States Treasury Department, “History of ‘In God We Trust,’” March 8, 2011, accessed online.

²¹ *American Exceptionalism and Civil Religion*, 122.

²² *American Exceptionalism and Civil Religion*, 141, 201.

The Great Commission

- Question: Who did Jesus give this commission to?
- Answer: His *Disciples*

The eleven disciples traveled to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had directed them. **17** When they saw him, they worshiped, but some doubted. **18** Jesus came near and said to them, “All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth. **19** Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, **20** teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” — Matthew 28:16–20

- Question: Does being an American make you a disciple of Jesus
- Answer: *No* it does not
- Sharing the same *moral* or political values does not mean sharing the same *spiritual* commitments.

Christian *Nationalism*

- An *expression* of American civil religion
- Uses Christian language, symbols, and customs to promote a divine *character* and *purpose* for America. (sees America as a New Israel; a New Chosen Nation; a New Light to the World)
- In its purest form it's a form of *Idolatry*²³
 - Gives primary allegiance to nation or national leader instead of Jesus
 - Centralizes and exalts the nation—even using Christian trappings to do so.
 - Identifies good and evil along the lines of perceived national interests.
 - Ascribes a degree of innocence and/or moral purity to the nation and/or preferred leader.
 - Uses Biblical references to justify a sense of national chosen-ness, mission, and innocence.
 - Fails to distinguish between applying Christian *principles* vs. establishing a Christian *state*.
 - Is willing to compromise certain biblical values in order to crush the perceived enemy.
 - Understands *national missions* to be synonymous with *spiritual movements*.

We must recognize that Christian Nationalism in its most pure form is indeed idolatrous. It looks to political power as the thing that will truly save us. It identifies a particular set of social policies as *the* Christian view—all others are not just mistaken, but evil heresies. It assumes that America now has replaced Israel as the chosen people and the world's “Redeemer-Nation.” It is true that these ideas are not usually stated out loud, but they dominate the movement as often unspoken assumptions, as unquestionable “givens.” And they must be rejected as unbiblical and idolatrous...Christian Nationalism matters because it supports authoritarian rule and because it can justify violence by using the trappings and rhetoric of religion and of the sacred. “It co-opts Christian language and iconography in order to cloak particular political...ends in moral and religious symbolism” (153). This means it undermines commitments to patience, respect, and civility toward opponents, to freedom of speech, debate—all things necessary for a free, democratic society.” — Tim Keller²⁴

²³ See John Willsey, *American Exceptionalism and Civil Religion*. See also, Elana Schor, “Christianity on Display at Capital Riot Sparks New Debate,” *AP News*, January 28, 2021.

²⁴ “A Book Review on the Topic of Christian Nationalism [*Taking America Back for God* by Perry and Whitehead],” *Gospel in Life*, Quarter 1, 2021. The page reference in the quotation is from Perry and Whiteheads book.

Do not trust in nobles, in a son of man, who cannot save. When his breath leaves him, he returns to the ground; on that day his plans die. Happy is the one whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord his God... — Psalm 143:3–7a

I am the Lord. That is my name, and I will not give my glory to another or my praise to idols.... I—I am the Lord. Besides me, there is no Savior.— Isaiah 42:8; 43:11

There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to people by which we must be saved.”— Acts 4:12

Be careful that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit based on human tradition, based on the elements of the world, rather than Christ. — Colossians 2:8

Little children, guard yourselves from idols. — 1 John 5:21

“Nationalism is an ideology that emphasizes a “nation” and usually identifies one criterion—such as language, culture, race, homeland, constitutional order—as the unifying feature of a nation. Nationalism becomes idolatrous when people begin to worship the nation, in effect viewing it as the savior that will protect them from being corrupted or influenced by people who are different than them.”— Bruce Riley Ashford²⁵

“While Christianity aspires to draw people together on the basis of charity and humility, nationalism drives them apart on the basis of pride and tribal selfishness...[It is] fundamentally idolatrous... [I]t sees nation as a transcendent reality infusing ultimate meaning into the rest of life. A god need not demand that we literally bow the knee and sing its praises to claim divine status. It is sufficient that it demand unconditional loyalty overriding all other loyalties.

The key is to understanding the nationalist redemptive story, which generally runs along these lines: The nation has existed from time immemorial, established perhaps by gods or by God and given a particular historical mission to work out. But at some point the nation departs from its calling and falls under the oppressive rule of another people, perhaps a neighboring nation or a multinational empire...At some point, salvation comes when a national leader or a group of leaders rise up and throw off the yoke of oppression. Or they may gather the diaspora from exile and resettle their homeland, where they can resume their way of life as a people. In such cases salvation is either explicitly or implicitly identified with liberation from the alleged tyranny of a foreign nation...Nationalists, especially those whose culture had been shaped in some fashion by the Bible, easily adapt this story for their own purposes, assuming that God has chosen them for a special task.

Nationalism undertake[s] to emancipate the nation from the rule of others outside its self-defined boundaries. Either implicitly or explicitly, nationalists identify ultimate evil with being ruled by someone unlike oneself, whether this unlikeness be racial, cultural, linguistic, or religious.

There is some irony in the fact that many Christians, who are otherwise able to see through the pretensions of liberalism and socialism, are nevertheless among the first to jump on the “God and country” bandwagon. This is particularly true in countries that have enjoyed some degree of formative influence from the biblical redemptive narrative.”— David Koyzis²⁶

²⁵ *Letters to an American Christian*, 51.

²⁶ *Political Visions and Illusions*, 98, 99, 100,

Christian Nationalism vs. Christian *Patriotism*

- Christian Nationalism is *not* the same as Christian Patriotism.
- Christian Patriotism believes God has *blessed* America, but not that God has uniquely chosen America.
- Christian Patriotism maintains a distinction between God's covenants and God's *Providence*
- Christian Patriotism loves America enough to admit and *critique* its failings.
- Maintains a vital *distinction* between the *gospel* and American politics.

Nationalism is tribalistic, triumphalist, idolatrous, exclusivist, and violates justice. But patriotism is an expression of devotion to country that is defined by justice. In other words, patriotism is love expressed to the national community, but it is love properly measured and applied. Patriotism acknowledges a proper place for devotion, loyalty, gratitude and sacrifice for one's country. But patriotic expressions do not exclude others by necessity...When patriotism is rooted in justice, then it does not blind itself to the flaws and failings of the nation. Rather, patriotism seek to rectify those flaws and learn from the failures so as not to repeat them. The result of this attitude is that patriots create potential for the flourishing of the whole community. — John Wilsey²⁷

[P]atriotism or patriotic loyalty...is not idolatrous; rather it is a limited affection for a community of fellow citizens bound together for purposes of government and based on a defined territory. A nation cannot be unified on the basis of only the mutual satisfaction of utilitarian needs. It must rather be bound together by an active dedication to the maintenance of the body politic. To call this dedication love is quite proper if we understand that this particular form of love is distinct from that between close friends, husband and wife, or parents and children. Patriotic loyalty is thus inextricably tied to the shared commitment to do public justice within the context of political community. — David Koyzis²⁸

In the America, nationalism sometimes manifests itself as an excessive allegiance to the United States as a nation or idea. The variety of nationalists usually view their nation as superior to other nations in the ability to exemplify some transcendent value. Usually, this value is freedom. Because our nation possessed the highest virtue, the argument goes, our nation our nation must therefore be God's favorite. This sort of thinking goes beyond patriotism (which is healthy and good) by glorifying the nation...A proper Christian patriotism will engender a humble love of one's nation rather than arrogant or unjust forms of nationalism— Bruce Riley Ashford²⁹

Whence to God alone we render worship, but in other things we gladly serve you [the Roman government], acknowledging you as kings and rulers of men, praying that with your kingly power you be found to possess also sound judgment. — Justin Martyr (2nd century church father)³⁰

²⁷ *American Exceptionalism and Christian Religion*, 116.

²⁸ *Political Visions and Illusions*, 113.

²⁹ *Letters to an American Christian*, 52.

³⁰ *The First Apology of Justin in The Apostolic Church Fathers*, Justin Martyr to Irenaeus, vol.1, 168.

A Commissioned Nation?

Has God given America a special, divine commission?

- *No*—He has commissioned His disciples.
- God no longer commits Himself to *one* nation, but to His church are made of people from *every* nation.

When he took the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp and golden bowls filled with incense, which are the prayers of the saints. And they sang a new song: You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slaughtered, and you purchased people for God by your blood from every tribe and language and people and nation. You made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they will reign on the earth. — Revelation 5:8–10

After this I looked, and there was a vast multitude from every nation, tribe, people, and language, which no one could number, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were clothed in white robes with palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: Salvation belongs to our God, who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb! — Revelation 7:9–10

Concern for one's political community is, of course, right and proper, and Christians can hardly be faulted for wishing to correct their nation's deficiencies. At the same time, this variety of Christian nationalism errors on at least four accounts.

First, it unduly applies biblical promises intended for the body of Christ as a whole to one of many particular geographic concentrations of people bound together under a common political framework.

Second, it tends to identify God's norms for political and cultural life with a particular, imperfect manifestation of those norms at a specific period of a nation's history... Thus Christian nationalists, like their conservative counterparts, tend to judge their nation's present actions, not by transcendent norms given by God, but by precedents in their nation's history deemed to have embodied these norms.

Third, Christian nationalists too easily pay their nation a homage due only to God. They make too much of their country's symbols, institutions, laws, and mores. They see its history as somehow revelatory of God's ways and are largely blind to the outworking of sin in that same history. When they do detect national sin, they tend to attribute it not to something defective in the nation's ideological underpinnings but to its departure from a once solid biblical foundation during an imagined pre-fall golden age. If the nation's beginnings are not as thoroughly Christian as they would like to believe, they will seize whatever evidence is available in this direction and construct a usable past serviceable to a more Christian future.

Fourth, and finally, those Christians most readily employing the language of nationhood may find it difficult to conceive the nation in limited terms. Frequently, Christian nationalists see the nation as an undifferentiated community with few if any constraints on its claims to allegiance.”
— David Koyzis³¹

³¹ *Political Visions and Illusions*, 118.

God's Purpose for America Today

- God has *not* told us that.
- What we *do* know: God is working out His will in history (Isaiah 46:9–10)
- What we *don't* know: How much or how long America will be a part of that
- Thankfully, there is a group of people who Christ has promised to be here until the end—*the church* (Matthew 16:18)

Jesus responded, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overpower it. — Matthew 16:17–18

“Many Christians assume that God chose America to be his special people to do his work in the world. Many uncritically accept patriotic expressions as a part of church worship services...For many Christian people, patriotism equals spirituality because their assumption is that America is God's country. Anyone who stands with America is, therefore, holy, good, and just. Anyone who stands against America is scandalous, immoral—perhaps even demonic.

By linking the American nation with God...closed American exceptionalism [i.e. Nationalism] produces harmful assumptions leading to a form of civil engagement that divides people into groups, namely, the Chosen and the Inferior Other. Closed exceptionalism takes the ideals like federal democracy, individual freedom, equality, natural rights and government by consent and spiritualizes them, so that they become normative and binding on their uniquely American expression for all people at all times regardless of contingent factors. [This] breeds injustice.

Open exceptionalism [patriotism] is an intellectual framework that situates American ideals in history and experience. It accounts for flaws and imperfections in the American nation. [It] does not envision a nation divided into groups, but one united around commonly held ideals applied to all and places enjoyed by all. And open exceptionalism does not conflict with Christian teaching by idealizing or idolizing the nation.

Perhaps the first task before Christian people, when considering what open exceptionalist [patriotic] civic engagement looks like, is to differentiate the church from the nation while situating the church within the national community. By doing this, Christians understand that patriotism does not equate to spirituality. By simultaneously distancing the church from the nation and placing it within the nation, Christians need not sacrifice their unique confession of faith, their loyalty to the nation or their prophetic voice when nations act unjustly.

America is not the kingdom and American patriotism does not equate to godly devotion. But sacrificial loyalty to the nation is not incompatible with the faith, provided that Christians follow Christ's admonition in Mark 12:17 to “render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's.”—John Wilsey³²

³² *American Exceptionalism and Civil Religion*, 220, 222.

C. What is God's Purpose for *the Church*?

Three Elements

1. The Great *Commission*

Jesus came near and said to them, "All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth. **19** *Go, therefore, and make disciples* of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, **20** teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." — Matthew 28:18–20

2. The Great *Commandment*

34 When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they came together. **35** And one of them, an expert in the law, asked a question to test him: **36** "Teacher, which command in the law is the greatest?"

37 He said to him, "**Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.** **38** This is the greatest and most important command. **39** The second is like it: **Love your neighbor as yourself.** **40** All the Law and the Prophets depend on these two commands." — Matthew 22:34–40

3. The Great *Requirement*

Mankind, he has told each of you what is good and what it is the Lord requires of you: *to act justly, to love faithfulness, and to walk humbly with your God.* — Micah 6:8

"The biblical God does not judge people on the basis of what they say they believe, but on how they actually act. The book of James tells us that if we say we have faith in Jesus, but that faith does not bring us to love and help needy brethren, it is "dead"—i.e. it isn't real. Genuine saving faith always issues in deeds of love, sacrifice, mercy — that is to say, it is displayed in our obedience to God. We don't obey *in order to be saved*, but **because we have been saved.**" — Tim Keller³³

How Do We (SGF) Seek to Do This?

1. *Collectively*: A Number of Ways
 - Worship and Preaching on Sunday Mornings
 - Heavy focus on serving and discipleship across all ministries.
 - Pour our hearts into the next generation.
 - New church-planting initiative
2. *Individually*: That's up to You
 - Serve with a non-profit (Kaleidoscope; Breaking Bread)
 - Attend or lead a discipleship group.
 - Serve on a ministry team.
 - Be a faithful spouse, parent, and/or leader in our community.

³³ "A Book Review on the Topic of Christian Nationalism [*Taking America Back for God* by Perry and Whitehead],"

A Vital Distinction

Missional *Calling* vs. Missional *Application*

- The Church (at large) has a universal Missional Calling to make disciples, love our neighbors, eat at Chick Fil-A (JK :P), seek justice, etc.
- *Individual* Christians have a unique Missional Application: you must choose how/when you will obey and apply this calling in your life.
- A Word of Caution: not every opportunity is an *obligation*; not every injustice is an *invitation*

How Do You Know?

- Basic Questions: Gifting, Passion, Ability, etc.
- Vital Question: *Moral Proximity*³⁴
 - The *closer the need*, the *greater the responsibility* to help.
 - What are the needs of my family?
 - What are the issues in my community?
 - What are the opportunities in my church?
 - How am I uniquely gifted / positioned to serve?

Jesus took up the question and said, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him, beat him up, and fled, leaving him half dead. **31** A priest happened to be going down that road. When he saw him, he passed by on the other side. **32** In the same way, a Levite, when he arrived at the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. **33** But a Samaritan on his journey came up to him, and when he saw the man, he had compassion. **34** He went over to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on olive oil and wine. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. **35** The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him. When I come back I’ll reimburse you for whatever extra you spend.’ **36** “Which of these three do you think proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” **37** “The one who showed mercy to him,” he said. Then Jesus told him, “Go and do the same.” — Luke 10:30–37

Brothers and sisters, if someone is overtaken in any wrongdoing, you who are spiritual, restore such a person with a gentle spirit, watching out for yourselves so that you also won’t be tempted. **2** Carry one another’s burdens; in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. **3** For if anyone considers himself to be something when he is nothing, he deceives himself. **4** Let each person examine his own work, and then he can take pride in himself alone, and not compare himself with someone else. **5** For each person will have to carry his own load... **9** Let us not get tired of doing good, for we will reap at the proper time if we don’t give up. **10** Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us work for the good of all, especially for those who belong to the household of faith. — Galatians 6:1–5, 9–10

If anyone has this world’s goods and sees a fellow believer in need but withholds compassion from him—how does God’s love reside in him? Little children, let us not love in word or speech, but in action and in truth.— 1 John 3:17–18

³⁴Gilbert and DeYoung, *What is the Mission of the Church?*, 183–186.

The Role of Church Leaders

- Ephesians 4:11–16; 1 Timothy 3; Titus 1:5–7; 2:1; 1 Peter 5:1–5
- Primarily we want to **shepherd** you and **equip** you in the Word of God.
- Our primary calling is to preach, teach, and apply the **Word**

I solemnly charge you before God and Christ Jesus, who is going to judge the living and the dead, and because of his appearing and his kingdom: **2** Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; correct, rebuke, and encourage with great patience and teaching. **3** For the time will come when people will not tolerate sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, will multiply teachers for themselves because they have an itch to hear what they want to hear. **4** They will turn away from hearing the truth and will turn aside to myths. **5** But as for you, exercise self-control in everything, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.— 2 Timothy 4:1–5

A Common Question

- Why don't you preach more about political issues?
- Response: Which issues are you talking about?
- When there's clear overlap between political/cultural issues and biblical issues, we **can** and **may** preach about those things (i.e. sexuality, gender, hatred, division, marriage, abortion, etc.)
- When there's not clear overlap, we **can't** preach about those things (i.e. claims of voter fraud, immigration policy, gun laws, etc.)

What This Means Practically

- The moment we bind your conscience to anything other than Scripture is the moment we've **disobeyed** God and **abused** our authority.
- God has some very strong words for people who put words in His mouth (Jeremiah 14:14–15; 23:16–40; 29:31–32; 2 Peter 2)
- We will never tell you who to **vote** for; that's between you and God (Romans 14)
- Such an action would be outside our **calling** and outside our **competency**

“When pastors or churches tie their names to a piece of govt. policy, legislation, or nomination, they effectively tie the name of Jesus to that endeavor...When a church does [this], it...subverts the mission of the church to being a branch of that party. Non-Christians will begin to view that church as a lobbying wing of a party and Christians as political operatives within that party. Talk about undermining the gospel!” — Jonathan Leeman³⁵

³⁵ *How the Nations Rage*, 147, 149

Moving Forward

- Many people—especially young people—reject the faith because of how the church has *conflated* the gospel with a political party.³⁶
- The church must maintain a *transcendent* orientation to social-political issues.
- We can do better than this; we *must* do better than this.
- That doesn't mean your faith shouldn't determine your politics; it means you shouldn't make your faith all about your politics.
- The right kind of political influence is great and very important (Esther; Nehemiah)
- Even if all your political dreams come true, our world will still be full of sinners who need the hope of Jesus Christ.
- What *message* will we give them? (*God & Country or Christ and Him Crucified?*)

"I have said that American priests pronounce themselves in a general manner to be in favor of civil freedom without excepting even those who do not accept religious freedom; however, **one does not see them lend their support to any political system in particular**. They take care to keep themselves outside affairs and **do not mix in the schemes of the parties**....all attributed the peaceful dominion that religion exercises in their country principally to **the complete separation of church and state**...I did not encounter a single man, priest, or laymen, who did not come to accord on this point...In America, religion is perhaps **less powerful** than it has been in certain times and among certain people's, **but its influence is more lasting**. It is reduced to **its own strength**, which no one can take away from it; it acts in one sphere only, but it covers the whole of it and dominates it without effort." — Alexis DeTocqueville, 1834³⁷

"It is imperative to distinguish between the Christian gospel and the concept of national closeness in closed American exceptionalism [i.e. Nationalism]. The gospel and closed American exceptionalism are mutually exclusive. To accept the gospel is necessarily to reject closed American exceptionalism, not only because they are two different things, but because their objects of loyalty are two distinct entities in opposition to one another...The biblical expressions of [divine] election must not be required to pay for the sins of the nation. Rather, **the Christian gospel should be allowed to speak on its own terms as it is articulated in Scripture, and thus be accepted or rejected without reference to America.**" — John Wilsey³⁸

³⁶ Barna Group, "U.S. Adults See Evangelicals Through a Political Lens," *The Barna Group*, November 21, 2019; Kim Parker and Ruth Igielnik, "On the Cusp of Adulthood and Facing an Uncertain Future: What We Know About Gen Z So Far," *Pew Research Center*, May 14, 2020; David French, "The Cultural Consequences of a Very, Very Republican Christianity," *The Dispatch*, November 15, 2020.

³⁷ *Democracy in America*, translated and edited by Mansfield and Winthrop, 278, 283, 286

³⁸ *American Exceptionalism and Civil Religion*, 115.

“Christian Nationalism, to the degree it is influential, means the death of Christian witness. The ethos of Christian Nationalism is to not in any way try to persuade, win, or evangelize their opponents. Their attitude toward unbelievers is: “They are evil—what does their opinion matter? Sure they hate you—just hate them right back. Own the libs.” The motivation of witness—a desire to see all people come to know Christ—has been completely eradicated in **Christian Nationalism, which proves that it is not ultimately a religious movement at all, just one more political movement using the power of religious language.**” — Tim Keller³⁹

“If the institutional church speaks out too frequently and at the least provocation, its persuasive power will diminish with each utterance, especially if such statements form a predictable pattern indicative of a different sort of ideological captivity. **Speaking out too often makes it more difficult for parishioners to distinguish between ordinary political disagreements and genuine crisis**—between, say, a preferred party’s defeat at the polls and the developing threat of official anti-Semitism or other manifestations of religious persecution. For the most part, the institutional church, apart from fearlessly proclaiming the gospel message, remains silent unless forced to speak. Nevertheless, the gathered community of faithful worshipers functions primarily to “make disciples...” (Mt. 28:19–20). While **the church institution may not necessarily address politics directly or very often, it must equip its members to live lives of service before god and neighbor, and this includes political life.**” —David Koyzis⁴⁰

³⁹“A Book Review on the Topic of Christian Nationalism [*Taking America Back for God* by Perry and Whitehead],”

⁴⁰ *Political Visions and Illusions*, 286.

Recommended Resources

America's Founding

- *One Nation Under God* by John Wilsey
- *Was America Founded as a Christian Nation?* by John Fea
- *The Religious Beliefs of the Founding Fathers* by Gregg L. Frazer

Nationalism, Patriotism, and Evangelicalism

- *American Exceptionalism and Civil Religion* by John Wilsey
- *The Evangelicals* by Frances Fitzgerald
- *Believe Me* by John Fea
- *Awakening of the Evangelical Mind* by Owen Strachan
- *One Nation Under God* by Kevin Kruse
- *Taking America Back for God* by Andrew Whitehead and Samuel Perry

Political Philosophy and Civic Engagement

- *Letters to an American Christian* by Bruce Riley Ashford
- *How the Nations Rage* by Johnathan Leeman
- *Political Visions and Illusions* by David Koyzis
- *How Can I Love Church Members with Different Politics?* by Jonathan Leeman and Andy Naselli
- *Compassion and Conviction* by Juston Giboney
- *Them* by Ben Sasse

American Intellectual & Religious History

- *America's Religious History* by Thomas Kidd
- *The Old Religion in a New World* by Mark Noll
- *In Search of Christian America* by Mark Noll and Nathan Hatch
- *The Civil War as Theological Crisis* by Mark Noll
- *A Short Life of Jonathan Edwards* by George Marsden
- *A Land of Hope* by Wilfred McClay
- *Democracy in America* by Alexis DeTocqueville

Personal Evangelism and Church Mission

- *What is the Mission of the Church?* by Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert
- *Tactics* by Greg Koukl
- *The Unbelievable Gospel* by Jonathan Dodson
- *Questioning Evangelism* by Randy Newman
- *Conversational Evangelism* by Norman and David Geisler

News and Public Commentary (Websites and Podcasts)

- The Dispatch (David French)
- The Breakpoint Foundation (John Stonestreet)
- The Briefing (Albert Mohler)
- Winsome Conviction (Biola University)
- Thinking in Public (Albert Mohler)
- The Way of Improvement Leads Home (John Fea)
- The Atlantic (www.theatlantic.com)
- Bruce Riley Ashford (www.bruceashford.net)
- AllSides (www.allsides.com)