Here’s where Christian nationalism comes from, and what it gets wrong

It was religious fervor that drove the Jan. 6 mob

By Ryan Sanders

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One year ago, a political mob invaded the U.S. Capitol by force, interrupted the functions of government, injured police and chanted its intent to lynch the vice president. In the months since, America has sought to make sense of that event. We have asked ourselves what could possibly have driven people to such dramatic action.

Sure, there was the “big lie” about a rigged election. There were QAnon conspiracy theories and Kevlar-clad militiamen. But there was something even stronger right there in front of the TV cameras. Alongside the Trump flags and the Confederate flags were symbols of religious devotion. Some rioters carried Christian flags and wore clothing bearing the slogans “Jesus 2020” and “Jesus is my savior. Trump is my president.”

The ideology on display that day is a misplaced vision of American identity called Christian nationalism. It’s a line of thinking popular among some conservative white American evangelicals, which is right in my wheelhouse. I
grew up in a Southern Baptist church, was ordained in a conservative nondenominational megachurch, and studied at a conservative evangelical seminary. This is my tribe. A year after the insurrection, I think it’s worth exploring how some of my people got to this dark place and how our nation might find its way out.

Christian nationalism is not new, and it’s not hard to understand, despite the head-scratching coverage of many in the national press. It is a strain of religious heterodoxy that seeks to meld religion and politics into an unholy mixture that contaminates both. It holds that, like Israel of the Old Testament, America is God’s chosen instrument to fulfill his purposes on Earth. Its adherents believe that America was intended, both by its founders and by God himself, to be a Christian nation, and that defenders of that birthright are divinely appointed to reinstate it by means of political power.

Consider, for example, the views of Ken Peters, pastor of Patriot Church in Knoxville, Tenn., who encouraged his congregation to attend Trump’s rally on Jan. 6.

“I believe we are the greatest country next to Israel. I got to give God Israel as his chosen people in the Old Testament,” Peters told documentary filmmakers in 2020. “America’s the greatest country that’s ever existed in the history of the world, and it’s because of Judeo-Christian values. ... We’re about to lose this country as we’ve always known it. It’s about to become something completely different. ... I don’t want it.”
Another Tennessee pastor, Matthew McCullough of Trinity Church in Nashville, has written a book on this topic called *The Cross of War*. McCullough defines Christian nationalism as “an understanding of American identity and significance held by Christians wherein the nation is a central actor in the world-historical purposes of the Christian God.”

*Relevant*, a Christian magazine popular with young evangelicals, calls Christian nationalism “The business of merging Christian and American identities, liberally mixing biblical teaching with the principles of constitutional democracy until the line between them is blurred or even erased altogether.”

That kind of syncretism has created a subculture within my tribe in which political ends are baptized with eternal significance. That raises the stakes. After all, if a political party loses an election, partisans simply regroup for the next one. But if God loses an election, something must be fundamentally wrong. Evil has prospered. And the righteous protectors of good may feel called upon to take up arms.

Christian nationalism isn’t attracting followers because it’s far-fetched. On the contrary, like all the most dangerous errors, it is attractive because it seems good. It is darkness masquerading as light, like the Apostle Paul warned. In modern parlance, we might say it is truth-adjacent.
The antecedents that form the foundation for Christian nationalism are not false, they’re only misinterpreted. There are at least four. The first has to do with American history.

**City on a hill**

In the months leading up to July 4, 1776, Connecticut minister Ebenezer Baldwin spoke for many in the Colonies when he wrote that America could become “the principal seat of the glorious kingdom, which Christ shall erect upon Earth in the latter days.” In other words, the destiny of America is to become the Kingdom of God itself. That idea is foundational to Christian nationalist ideology, and the historical evidence supporting it is plentiful.

It is certainly undeniable that the earliest European settlers in North America sought to establish in the New World an insular, exclusively Protestant enclave. They were explicit about that and, in fact, banished those like Puritan minister Roger Williams, who preached religious tolerance.

At least nine of the original 13 Colonies had established churches, most funded religious observance with tax dollars, and all required officeholders to be Christians, according to historians Daniel L. Dreisbach and Mark David Hall. None of the nation’s founders practiced any other world religion.

This divine purpose seemed to be confirmed in the events of the revolution. An outgunned American force overcame long odds to win independence, a fact which has invited explanations about Providence. The internet is full of
whimsical, historical vignettes about George Washington’s famous prayer at Valley Forge or other circumstances that seem to align America’s founding with divine purposes that nothing, not even the world’s most powerful military, could thwart.

In this understanding, America is a “city on a hill which cannot be hidden.” That familiar line is adapted from the words of Jesus himself, who told his followers they were the “light of the world.”

Adapting that language in 1630, the Puritan John Winthrop preached:

_We shall find that the God of Israel is among us, when ten of us shall be able to resist a thousand of our enemies; when He shall make us a praise and glory that men shall say of succeeding plantations, “may the Lord make it like that of New England.” For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us._

America, this thinking suggests, has a covenant with God. We perpetuate a Christian identity and, in return, he perpetuates security and prosperity.

It is also undeniable that Christianity has been the dominant religious system throughout American history. “In God we trust” is printed on our currency. Federal buildings are closed on Sundays. And in 1892, the Supreme Court declared that, culturally speaking, “this is a Christian nation.”
Christian nationalists seize on these themes to create a narrative of America as a chosen nation, created by God to serve his purposes.

Here’s where that goes wrong:

First, despite its proponents proof-texting, the Bible does not declare America to be a modern Israel. That’s entirely fabricated.

Second, it confuses the descriptive with the prescriptive. The language the founders used when setting out the nation’s political parameters was explicitly pluralist: “Congress shall make no law regarding the establishment of religion.”

Seeing America’s identity through a Christian nationalist lens contributes to dysfunctional public discourse. To a Christian nationalist, those who disagree cannot be well-intentioned compatriots who support a different policy; they can only be devils who oppose God. They cannot be convinced by argument; they must be destroyed by force.

**A seat at the table**

The Christian nationalist narrative is aggressive because conservative Christians perceive a loss of cultural standing.

According to the Pew Research Center, the percentage of American adults who identify as Christian dropped 12 points over the past decade. And those who
identify with no organized religion, a category called “the Nones,” is the fastest growing religious segment in the nation. Non-Christian faiths are also growing, rising 1.2 percentage points between 2007 and 2014.

Further, America’s laws and customs seem to be drifting away from traditional evangelical values. On issues like abortion, gay marriage, gender, sex education and prayer in schools, conservative Christians see a long, disheartening descent from the halcyon days when you couldn’t get abortion on demand, pornography on your phone, a car on Sunday or a bottle of wine at the grocery store.

This Christmas, at the premiere of his film *American Underdog*, Christian filmmaker Andy Erwin voiced this sense of cultural loss in his industry: “People of [Christian] values used to be represented in Hollywood quite well,” Erwin told The Daily Wire. “We lost our seat at the table.”

A significantly large segment of American Christians feels that the culture in our country has left them behind. They refer to themselves as exiles or, recalling Moses, “strangers in a strange land.”

Befogged and offended by these shifts, Christian nationalists are rising up in a misguided effort to reclaim cultural hegemony. This is the impetus behind calls to “take back America.” This is why the unvarying message of Christian nationalism is to “wake up,” “step up” or “stand against the culture.”
A few weeks after the attack on Jan. 6, I called Glenn Kreider, one of my favorite professors at Dallas Theological Seminary, to see how he was interpreting these trends. He connected the rise of Christian nationalism to this decline of evangelical hegemony. Christianity is losing its entitlement, he told me, and it’s convulsing in response. He called it “the dying gasp of our privilege.”

In 2018, Katherine Stewart, author of *The Power Worshippers: Inside the Dangerous Rise of Religious Nationalism*, wrote in *The New York Times*, “What Christian nationalists know — and many of us have yet to learn — is that you don’t need a majority to hijack a modern democracy. You just need a sizable minority, marinating in its grievances, willing to act as a bloc and impervious to correction by fact or argument.”

**The end of days**

One factor that makes this movement especially impervious to correction is its seeding in eschatology, the study of End Times.

Evangelicals are endlessly fascinated by predictions about the end of history set forth in the biblical Book of Revelation. At the seminary I attended, students prided themselves on complicated charts that slotted in such events as the Great Tribulation, the collapse of world markets, the rapture of the faithful and the second coming of Christ.
The most popular Christian fiction books in history, the *Left Behind* series by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, are about End Times. They sold more than 65 million copies and spun off four feature films.

In the 1990s, I knew a conservative Christian who interpreted every negative headline as evidence of the coming judgment after America’s rejection of its holy heritage. She said we were living in “Clinton Days,” using that as a stand-in for the End Times. Why was crime a problem? Clinton Days. Why was there war in the Middle East? Clinton Days.

Though she might have taken it further than most, this is a common line of thinking among conservative evangelicals. Every headline is to be interpreted through the lens of eschatology. Every G20 meeting has to find its place on an End Times chart.

Jesus himself warned followers to keep careful watch for his return. Evangelicals are among those who have taken this commandment most literally and most seriously. But it’s a difficult one to follow, and evangelical suspicion that every world event carries some cosmic implication often leads us far afield.

**Iron Man**

So Christian nationalism mixes America’s religious heritage, conservative politics, a foreboding sense of cultural loss and an eschatological lens. That
much has been well-documented in dozens of books, films and articles. But I think there’s one more factor that contributes significantly: Hero worship.

We evangelicals love our heroes. There are entire book series about heroes of the Bible. Church history is largely understood as a succession of great men who had the courage to stand up to emperors, heretics or popes.

In 2020, the evangelical world was set ablaze by Kristin Kobes du Mez’s Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation, which traces a thread of toxic masculinity throughout American evangelical history. I think du Mez overstated her case at times, but there is no denying she’s onto something. The evangelical mind is formed by stories of singular, heroic men who refuse to back down. Sometimes these heroes carry a message, like Billy Graham. Sometimes they carry a gun, like John Wayne.

Many of the churches where Christian nationalism thrives are built around a single leader whose interpretations of ancient texts and current events go unchallenged.

And the hero motif is reinforced by the cultural tropes evangelicals accept. One of the last cultural refuges where conservative evangelicals aren’t confronted with their loss of influence is at the movies, particularly PG-13 movies. In this way, Marvel Studios may mold the evangelical imagination just as profoundly as the New Testament.
Even films labeled explicitly Christian, like *American Underdog*, now follow the same narrative arc: a hero is imbued with some germ of promise, faces adversity, has a crisis of faith and then wins some Earthly prize: a Super Bowl, a recording contract or the love of a crush. This may be the reason *I Can Only Imagine* found a following among evangelicals, but *Silence* did not.

Evangelical consumers who praise such films for their family-friendly content seem to forget that none of the heroes of the Bible were chosen because of their moral potential. And almost none received any kind of material reward. The famous people of the Bible like Moses, David, Peter and Paul were violent, lustful, manipulative, judgmental and cowardly. And most died poor, outcast and misunderstood.

The heroic arc also matters because heroes require villains, and so does Christian nationalism. To keep adherents frenzied, there must always be some existential crisis: a threat, a sneaky tempter with designs on spoiling God’s geopolitical purpose. Throughout evangelical history, this villain has worn the masks of communists, Catholics, women’s rights advocates, abortion doctors, Disney, gun control activists, Hollywood, the media, gay people, Democrats, coastal elites and Caitlyn Jenner.

The sheer number of villains might be a clue that this ideology can’t stand without them.

**Mobs and marches**
Here, then, are the ingredients of Jan. 6: a heritage of Christian centrality in American history, a perception of its loss, an ever-growing list of grievances against the “secular agenda,” a propensity toward hero worship and a fascination with End Times.

When these ideas get mashed up with social media echo chambers and conspiracy theories advanced by unscrupulous politicians, the result is a perversion of orthodox Christianity and a subversion of democratic ideals that threatens both the church and state.

It’s important to note that Christian nationalism is not synonymous with evangelicalism. Many mainline Christians support this ideology and many evangelicals condemn it.

Nor is Christian nationalism the same as the belief that righteous behavior is good for a nation. It doesn’t make one a Christian nationalist to believe that when people live in obedience to biblical commands like loving their neighbors, honoring parents, avoiding addiction, remaining faithful in marriage and submitting themselves in prayer, those behaviors yield better outcomes in individual and collective lives.

I should also note that some commentators have seen troubling connections between Christian nationalism and other power systems like patriarchy and white supremacy. I don’t deny that those connections exist, but I’m limiting this examination to just these four pillars of the ideology.
On its own, none of those four themes is strong enough to have created Jan. 6. There’s nothing wrong with loving superhero movies or with taking pride in America’s religious heritage. But mixed together, these elements form a cocktail that threatens to stupefy both democracy and faith. In fact, the biggest problem with Christian nationalism is not politics, it’s ecclesiology: how churches are governed and how they interact with the world around them.

And here’s the ecclesiastical secret Christian nationalists miss: Christianity functions best when it has the least power. In fact, that is one of Christianity’s unique contributions to history. All other ancient religions identified gods with powerful people. Emperors and pharaohs were worshiped as gods. Kings were given direct access to God. But Jesus identified with “the least of these” and turned the religious power dynamic on its head.

Throughout history, the church has too easily forgotten that lesson. Most famously, this happened in the fourth century. When Christianity ceased to be a breakaway Jewish sect and became the foundation of the Holy Roman Empire, the mission got co-opted. Church leaders who pursue political power are abandoning their calling. They can’t serve two masters.

Kreider, my seminary professor, warned about this danger.

“The church has never been in charge of the world in which she lives,” Kreider said. “She functions as a minority voice. [Martin Luther] King [Jr.] was right. She is to be the prophetic voice to the culture. When she becomes the one in
power, she becomes like every other power broker. Then power becomes more important than the gospel, than character.”

A pithy version of Kreider’s warning has been circulating on Christian Twitter: “When you mix religion and politics, you get politics.”

There is good news, however. According to the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI), significantly fewer Americans today believe that God has granted America a special role in human history than did just eight years ago. And an ecumenical statement condemning Christian nationalism has been signed by more than 18,000 pastors and Christian leaders.

But the desire for Christian cultural hegemony still exists, especially among white evangelicals. Also according to PRRI, only 13% of that group prefers religious diversity. And it’s the only religious cohort in America from which a majority (57%) agree with the statement, “I would prefer the U.S. to be a nation primarily made up of people who follow the Christian faith.”

Despite the banners carried to the Capitol on Jan. 6 last year, Christian nationalists don’t take justification for their movement from the words of Jesus. The Jesus of the Bible admonished followers to love their enemies and care for the poor and immigrant. He consistently rejected invitations to seize political power. The political playbook of the New Testament may be most clearly articulated by the Apostle Peter, who admonished followers to “live such good lives among the pagans that ... they may see your good deeds and glorify God.”
In contrast, Christian nationalists take their cues from the Old Testament. The Jan. 6 rally included a “Jericho march.” That was a reference to an episode in the Book of Joshua in which the people of Israel marched around the city of Jericho, after which the city walls collapsed and the Israelite army rushed in to massacre men, women, children and livestock. It was clearly a call for violence.

American Christianity cannot embrace both the God of peace and the god of politics. We cannot have both Jericho and the New Jerusalem.

**Two masters**
Predictably, the two masters of Christian nationalism are already diverging. On Dec. 19, Donald Trump Jr. declared Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount a failed policy. At an event sponsored by Turning Point USA, Trump Jr. said, “We’ve turned the other cheek, and I understand, sort of, the biblical reference — I understand the mentality — but it’s gotten us nothing. OK? It’s gotten us nothing while we’ve ceded ground in every major institution in our country.”


Trump Jr.’s comments are illuminating because he seems to articulate that the shift away from Christian teaching is intentional: “We’ve been playing tee ball for half a century, while they’re playing hardball and cheating.” Trump Jr. and those who support his line of thinking are ready to play the world’s political
game; ready to give up the countercultural humility that Jesus announced and join the race to the political bottom.

Here, then, is the final bankruptcy of Christian nationalism. It makes a bad bargain. It trades virtue for power, mystery for mendacity, the keys of heaven for broken windows on Capitol Hill.

Perhaps singer-songwriter Derek Webb knows this tribe best when he confesses:

*I am so easily satisfied
*By the call of a lover so less wild
*That I would take a little cash
*Over your very flesh and blood.

Christian nationalism weaponizes America’s religious heritage, but faithful Christians must beat those weapons into plowshares. Christian nationalism shouts that God’s side is losing, but faithful Christians must remember that “unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed.” Christian nationalism makes enemies out of neighbors, but faithful Christians love their enemies as well as their neighbors. Christian nationalism seeks to elevate political strongmen to “save America,” but faithful Christians promote only one savior.
America needs the Christian gospel. Throughout our nation’s history, Christianity has promoted harmony, morality, stability and good will. And America needs patriots willing to protect against incursions like the one we saw a year ago. What America doesn’t need is Christian nationalists.

[Image]

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