

Christian and American
Matthew 5:43-48 (The Message)
June 28, 2026
North Decatur Presbyterian Church
Rev. David Lewicki, preaching

“You’re familiar with the old written law, ‘Love your friend,’ and its unwritten companion, ‘Hate your enemy.’ I’m challenging that. I’m telling you to love your enemies. Let them bring out the best in you, not the worst. When someone gives you a hard time, respond with the supple moves of prayer, for then you are working out of your true selves, your God-created selves. This is what God does. God gives God’s best—the sun to warm and the rain to nourish—to everyone, regardless: the good and bad, the nice and nasty. If all you do is love the lovable, do you expect a bonus? Anybody can do that. If you simply say hello to those who greet you, do you expect a medal? Any run-of-the-mill sinner does that.

⁴⁸ “In a word, what I’m saying is, *Grow up*. You’re citizens of God’s kingdom. Now live like it. Live out your God-created identity. Live generously and graciously toward others, the way God lives toward you.”

It doesn’t feel easy days to publicly identify as a Christian, especially a “moderate” or “liberal” Christian, which many of you would (grudgingly) concede that you are.

Christianity always gets faithful critiques from the left by our wonderful atheist and agnostic friends who believe, with Karl Marx, that religion is “the opiate of the people,” that we Christians are mostly deluded, and Christianity deserves as much place as astrology in shaping politics (maybe less because astrology has a shorter track record of oppression). However, on today’s right comes a different kind of challenge to Christian identity—a group of Christians who are not only conservative in their views on the Bible, theology, and gender and sexuality, but some of them seem convinced that God loves America more than any other nation. We’ve come to call this weird phenomenon “Christian Nationalism.”

Three of you asked me to preach on Christian nationalism for our summer preaching series, and because we’re so close to the 250th birthday of this nation, and many of us will be thinking in the days to come about what makes this nation special and worth celebrating, today I’d like to talk about Christian nationalism as a kind of heresy.

Christian nationalism is hard to define—there’s no official organization or mission statement. In short, it’s the idea that the United States and God’s purposes in the world are fundamentally intertwined. Christian nationalists believe the US was, is, and should be a *Christian* nation. Which begs the question, what is a “Christian” nation? Is it a nation where most people are Christian? We already are that. Is it a nation where the leaders are Christian? We already are that, too. Is it a nation where the laws and culture are informed by the teachings of Christianity? Arguably, we are that, too. What’s all that threatening about Christian nationalism?

Here are few of the concerning concepts that are connected to this way of thinking about America:

- **America was founded to be a Christian nation.** Let's just say that's just plainly wrong. Many, if not most, of America's "founders" were Christian. But every historian of early America observes that the founding of the American colonies was as much a money-making venture as a religious enterprise. The better argument from history is that profit is America's true religion. And when the government of the new nation was formed, its architects took great pains to moderate religion's formal role. These guys had lived with a state church in England and they didn't want one here. They wrote safeguards into the Constitution: Article 6 prohibits religious tests for office holders. And the First Amendment ensures religious freedom while prohibiting the state from "establishing" any particular religion. This was genius. It's created a marvelous functional tension throughout America's history. Lots of religion—and crazy religious diversity, but no state-sponsored religion.
- **Christian nationalists also believe that America is exceptional.** Not just special, but God gives the United States blessings and privileges that are not available to people in other countries. This is a weird idea, too, right? Can you people please get out more? I've traveled enough to know I'm pretty sure that God is present in a lot of other countries, too. Yes, the US is a unique and remarkable experiment in self-governance; there is a level of freedom and prosperity here that few other nations enjoy. Those aspects are worth celebrating this week. But I can love my children and think they are unique and exceptional, but I am under no illusion that they have never done anything wrong! You can love America and still admit it's got some pretty major flaws. Like, for example, enslaving Black Americans for 250 years and deny them equal justice for another 100. Stealing the land from the original inhabitants is a flaw. It's not complicated—it's true to say we are a nation both deeply blessed, and deeply sinful. That's America's identity. You'd think that Christian nationalists would get this because it is Christian theology 101—it's Martin Luther, *simul iustus et peccator*; all of us saints and sinners.

Christian nationalists tend toward a bunch of other fringe ideas:

- Only white European Christians can be custodians of this nation's heritage. That Christians of other races or ethnicities and people of other faiths should be tolerated, but aren't fully American.
- They tend to be patriarchal, heteronormative, and authoritarian. Some of them have weird interests in the Confederacy or Nazis.
- And perhaps this goes without saying, but Christian nationalists believe that conservative evangelical theology is the only real Christian theology. They don't think that you and I are "real" Christians.
- They see themselves as victims in America—persecuted by the Godless left, and they are fighting a revolution to "take the country back" for God.

Some of this is alarming. But our media ecosystem has probably blown it out of proportion. The mainstream media has been awash with fear-mongering about the “rise of Christian nationalism” for over a decade. Which begs the question, is Christian nationalism really on the rise?

Read some articles and some scholars, you’d think every other person in America is a Christian nationalist. I’ve seen “studies” claiming that over 50% of Americans sympathize with Christian nationalism. That’s absurd. The reason you get a number like that surveys won’t ask, “*are you a Christian nationalist?*,” the survey will ask a question like: “*Should the federal government advocate Christian values?*” Should it? My first instinct is “yes!” Doesn’t that mean advocating for love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control? What are Christian values? Prayer in school? Banning dancing and drinking? Banning abortion? Or does it mean letting justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a flowing stream, does it mean America making good on its “promissory note” to all Americans as King famously demanded in his speech at the Lincoln memorial? When asked in a survey whether the government should advocate for Christian values, you might be tempted to answer yes, but it doesn’t make you a Christian nationalist.

When you ask people more direct questions about Christian nationalism, you find that 10% of Americans espouse these. Another 20% are sympathetic. In general, the best data suggests that these views aren’t growing, they’re shrinking. Yes, there are some Christian nationalists like Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth who are in particularly influential positions, and these views have been brought into the tent of the current administration, but the idea that there’s a Christian nationalist takeover in the works feels unnecessarily alarmist.

My hope is that you and I will use this moment to distinguish what we moderate and liberal Christians believe about the best relationship between Christianity and politics.

Liberal Christians share with Christian nationalists the belief that faith belongs in politics. I reject a “strict separation” between church and state. I can’t separate my religious beliefs from my political engagement. As a liberal Christian, my faith influences the way I see and experience the world. My faith shapes what I believe a human being is: every human being is an image-bearer of the divine. This idea gets woven into my love of democracy itself. If God places God’s image in every one of us, if God’s Spirit moves in every one of us, then every one of us has, from God, equal political agency. Every person matters. Every voice matters. Every vote matters—it’s why voting is a sacred act. I can’t separate my religion from my politics. They have the same root.

This is also why the current administration’s violation of the rights of immigrants and its politicization of the justice department is so threatening. When you violate someone’s rights, you are violating their sacred inheritance—you’re defacing the image of God in that person. “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all people are created equal, that

they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights.” Unalienable means you can’t take them away. This is why we uphold the rule of law—it’s our way of ensuring the protection of God-given rights. When a President takes the oath of office, they swear to “preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States,” and they do it on the Bible, which means that defending the rule of law is protecting what is sacred in every person.

Politics can be brutal. It was true at the nation’s founding. It’s true today. Political differences cause people to get sideways with one another, to treat each other like enemies, even to kill one another. Our Founders knew that, from experience. They knew that any successful government would need a way to prevent politics from becoming a bloodsport. They ensured that our political system would articulate and protect certain rights that no political power can ever take away because those rights are given by God. To write this into your Constitution takes incredible self-restraint. It takes incredible depth of conscience. It requires you to understand human nature at its best and at its worst. To create a system of laws that protects your political rivals requires that person be listening to some kind of moral code, some kind of higher law, some kind of teaching that draws you out of your baser instincts and leads you treat other people better than you might. It’s almost as though the people who wrote our founding documents were listening to a voice, not their own, that told them to “love your neighbor as yourself and to love even your enemy.”

We don’t want or need a state church. But there was, and is, and will be a place for religion that forms the human character and molds the kind of soul that is necessary to our political life and the preservation of our democracy.