6 Questions for Christian Nationalists

Kevin DeYoung | Clearly Reformed

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I am not a Christian Nationalist, but I almost could be.

In my 2021 article, "What to Do With Christian Nationalism," I argued that there were two problems with Christian Nationalism.

First, no one agrees on what Christian Nationalism is. I cited Andrew Whitehead and Samuel Perry, who summarized Christian Nationalist beliefs in six statements: The federal government should (1) declare the United States a Christian nation, (2) advocate Christian values, (3) not enforce the strict separation of church and state, (4) allow religious symbols in public spaces, and (5) allow prayer in public schools. (6) The success of the United States is part of God's plan. By that definition, a majority of Americans believe one or more tenets of Christian Nationalism. I could almost support all six of those statements, depending on what is meant by words like "declare," "advocate," "success," and "strict separation." The Whitehead-Perry definition never stuck. There is still a wide range of views on what people mean by Christian Nationalism.

The second problem I identified was that no one was actually arguing for something called Christian Nationalism. If that was generally true in 2021 (and, in hindsight, I'm sure I missed some early voices embracing the term), it is no longer the case. In the last four years, there have been many people—in books, in blogs, on podcasts, in speeches, on X, and in personal conversation—eager to own the label Christian Nationalist and, in many places, argue strenuously for it.

For my part, while I never liked the term, I was (and still am) in favor of certain principles that some people may call Christian Nationalism. In April 2022, I wrote another article on Christian Nationalism, this time commending what Presbyterian pastor and Princeton Seminary professor Samuel Miller (1769–1850) called "enlightened patriotism." Miller had no patience for newer voices of "infidel fanaticism" that wanted to reject the religion of Christ and throw off the restraints of a religious and moral code. Miller insisted that without sound doctrine, Americans could not truly be moral, and without morality they would be miserable. The duty of Christians, therefore, was "to labor unceasingly to impart sound doctrine to all classes of people for the sake of our beloved country."

These two paragraphs go to the heart of what I was arguing in 2022 and what I still believe today:

> *Importantly, Miller's "enlightened patriotism" did not entail a state church (like Anglicanism in Virginia) or a Presbyterian establishment (like the Scottish Kirk). Every "species of alliance between church and state is forbidden and can never fail to become a curse to both." Miller did not want an officially Christian nation, but he did hope for a nation that was demonstrably Christian. In fact, he believed sound doctrine was the best medicine for the health of the republic: "You cannot take a more direct and certain course to render the insidious demagogue despised, and to deprive the profligate votary*

> *of ambition of all his influence; to inspire a love of liberty, and to promote the prevalence of the purest patriotism."*
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> *Miller's prescription for America would not have been controversial in Albany [where he preached this message], in the Presbyterian church, or in almost anywhere in early 19th-century America. Miller's evangelical audience was not hoping for a reunion of church and state. At the same time, neither was his audience nervous about a full-throated appreciation for the inestimable blessings of American self-government and constitutional liberties. Miller's "Christian nationalism"—to use the contested term—was not a political platform as much as it was the widely shared assumption that (1) Christians had good reason to be thankful for America, (2) Christianity has been instrumental in the founding of America, and (3) Christianity had a key role to play in preserving and passing on the privileges that belonged to free Americans.*

Many people, when they hear "Christian Nationalism" they think of the sorts of things Samuel Miller took for granted:

- Many of our founders were sincere Christians,
- America was founded on many Christian principles, and
- The health of America depends upon the virtue that comes from Christianity.

I say Amen to all of this. America should not be a secular nation with religion hidden away in the privacy of people's homes and churches.

I hope Christianity continues to have a prominent place in the public square, even a privileged place (as it has for most of the last 250 years). As Christians, we should not approach cultural engagement as an effort to negotiate favorable terms for our own surrender. We ought to argue for prudential policies and good laws that flow out of the best of Christian political thought.

Celebrating our Christian heritage, promoting Christian ideas in the public square, and having elected officials who are committed to historic Christianity and eager to see Christian churches protected and flourish—if that's Christian Nationalism, most evangelicals in this country would be for it. And so would I.

Why Not Christian Nationalism

And yet, I am not a Christian Nationalist. When asked why not, I usually rattle off four points.

(1) There is still no shared understanding of what the term means. Many proponents equate Christian Nationalism with support for some kind of church establishment and for the use of the state's coercive power in matters of religion. I am opposed to both of these things.

(2) The most prominent book making the case for Christian Nationalism, though not without some merits, has many serious problems, including a blurring of nation and ethnicity, a decentering of the importance of the church, a call for a "Christian prince" to "suppress the enemies of God" and to install a "measured theocratic Caesarism," and a final section that rails

against everything from living under a gynocracy to the presence of overweight PCA pastors who (presumably) have low testosterone and chug vegetable oil.

(3) Nationalism refers to a set of political and ethical commitments that arose at the end of the eighteenth century and was then shaped throughout the nineteenth century by romanticism and the industrial revolution. Championing Christian National*ism* is not the same as recognizing that for most of American history many Americans would have thought of their country as a Christian nation. Paul Marshall helpfully distinguishes between religious nationalism and religion-infused politics. Religious nationalism refers to a movement or ideology "promoting the interests of a particular nation, a group of people who believe they have a shared historical, cultural, lingual, or religious heritage, and commonly wish to have a state that expresses that heritage." This is not the same as asserting that religion has been a significant shaping force in a country's history, nor is it the same as arguing for key political principles on religious grounds. Religious nationalism, by contrast, usually calls for the state to protect the religious interests of one group, while marginalizing or suppressing other groups. "In so doing," Marshall explains, "it treats the members of the dominant religion and/or language, ethnicity, and culture as the core citizens and others as second class."

(4) Increasingly, the loudest voices arguing for Christian Nationalism are marked by juvenile insults steeped in online jargon from the dissident right. What's more, some of these proponents traffic openly in racist ideology, antisemitism, and Neo-Nazi sympathies. The most strident Christian Nationalism proponents on social media are often a potent combination of oafery and demagoguery.

In short, I don't believe the term Christian Nationalism is necessary, helpful, or wise. There are better ways—more precise and more accurate—to describe what serious Christian political thought might espouse and what robust Christian engagement in the political sphere might look like.

Six Questions

Having explained why I agree with some of the convictions that could be labeled "Christian Nationalism," and yet why I don't embrace the term, let me lay out several pertinent questions. These questions can be read as implicit statements, since it will be clear in explaining each question what I believe, but I also hope they will be read as genuine questions. There are varieties of Christian Nationalism, and it is not always clear whether the various proponents agree on the particularities of their theology or their political prescriptions. I do *not* believe that everyone associated with the label Christian Nationalism or who appreciates some of its emphases holds to everything I will speak against in these six questions. If I discover that some self-styled Christian Nationalists believe close to the same things I believe, I'll be grateful for that clarity. It may also be the case that many people in the pews *think* they like Christian Nationalism but haven't really thought through the ramifications of the most popular rhetoric.

Here, then, are six questions for Christian Nationalists and for those who are drawn to their vision of a more aggressively Christian magistrate and a vision for church-state relations that moves beyond the classic liberalism of the last 250 years.

1. Do you unequivocally renounce antisemitism, racism, and Nazism?
2. When and how does the nation act as a corporate moral person?
3. What is the purpose of civil government?
4. What does it mean for the civil magistrate to promote true religion?
5. Was the First Amendment a mistake?
6. What is the historical example of the political order you would like to see in America?

(Note: the reader will detect, if he hasn't already, that I am writing specifically for an American context, assuming our history and tradition. I hope that some of my arguments can be useful in other contexts as well.)

Question #1: Do you unequivocally renounce antisemitism, racism, and Nazism?

That is to say, do you hold to any of the following: (1) a disdain for Jewish people and a belief that a secret cabal of Jews are responsible for a litany of evils in our world, (2) a disdain for non-Whites and a belief in the mental and spiritual inferiority of Blacks, and (3) an appreciation for Adolf Hitler and a belief that Nazis were the misunderstood good guys in World War II? I know I haven't provided technical definitions for these isms or sought to substantiate my insinuation that all three are sinful and abhorrent. But that's the point. Most people don't need a lot of nuance to condemn antisemitism, racism, and Nazism. I commend Christian Nationalists like Doug Wilson who have called out these destructive sympathies on the right. It should be a simple thing to reject these ideologies and make clear that they have no place in conservatism, in Christianity, or in Christian Nationalism.

Question #2: When and how does the nation act as a corporate moral person?

Recently, Doug Wilson offered a defense and explanation of Christian Nationalism. The occasion for the post was the podcast conversation (mainly about Calvinism, but a little about Christian Nationalism) that I had with Hillsdale's president Larry Arnn. I thought Wilson's explanation was a friendly, good-faith effort to bring light (instead of heat) to a contested topic.

In the post, Wilson details two ideas, noting that "almost all believing Christians accept both premises." First, Wilson says all Christians agree that "true morality is grounded in the nature and character of the *living* God." Non-believers can still behave decently, Wilson argues, but they are unable to give a coherent account of why they are obligated to behave in such ways. Absolute moral claims must have a transcendental grounding. I agree.

The second point we supposedly all agree on is where things get more complicated: "All nations, states, or tribes are moral agents. They make decisions and take actions that are either righteous or they are not." You can see where this logic is heading. Every nation is going to have some religion. And if a nation is going to have a religion, it must have the true religion, and that means biblical Christianity. Every nation, like every individual, is going to be pleasing to God or displeasing to God, so Christians must insist that their nation be a Christian nation.

This sounds plausible, but the theological assumptions and political implications in this argument get murky very quickly. Let's start with theology. While the Bible teaches that nations can be judged for their wickedness, this is not the same as saying that the nation as a nation is a corporate moral person. Robert Dabney (1820–1898), for example, argued that although a nation is bound to obey and worship the true God, this "obligation is nothing else but the individual obligation of all the members, and nothing more is needed to defend or sanction it than their individual morality and religiousness" (*ST*, 881). In other words, an association of persons fulfills its religious and moral obligations through the *individual members* of that association, not as a corporate moral person. By Dabney's logic, the way to make a Christian nation is to make the people in the nation Christians.

The political implications of the "moral agent" argument are even more dicey. Consider these lines from Wilson's article:

> *So my version of Christian nationalism is simply this. America needs to stop making God mad. Abortion makes Him angry. Sodomy makes Him angry. Mammon-worship makes Him angry. Pornography makes Him angry. And the only way to avert the judgments of His anger is by repenting of our sin and turning back to Christ.*

I agree with all that Wilson is stating here. But I am not sure I agree with the unstated implication about what this means for the legitimacy of Christian Nationalism. I too want America to stop making God mad. (It's worth pointing out, as an aside, that the moral agency argument tends to only highlight ways that nations are wicked, rather than ever concluding, say, that America has more evangelical Christians than any other country and this makes God happy.) I love what Wilson says about repenting of our sin and turning back to Christ. But this seems to equate "moral agency" with Dabney's insistence that *individuals* fulfill the nation's obligations, not nations as such. While nations can outlaw abortion, sodomy, and pornography, no nation can effectively outlaw mammon-worship. I'm quite sure Wilson would say it's beyond the scope of government to criminalize the love of money. But if that is so, then we have established that nations do not have to—and, indeed, should not try to—outlaw everything that makes God angry. It seems to me, then (but I'm not sure Wilson would agree), that nations can be called to account before God without insisting that the government of those nations make declaratory statements about Christian doctrine or suppress non-Christian forms of religions expression.

Question #3: What is the purpose of civil government?

Many advocates of Christian Nationalism are champions of limited government. At the same time, they speak of government having authority to direct man to his highest and heavenly good. These two sets of convictions seem to be at odds. Is the purpose of government to protect God-given rights (e.g., life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness)? Or is government to be concerned with the whole perfection of man? One does not have to be a hardcore libertarian to appreciate that the United States Constitution is amazingly brief and quite constrained in what it is trying to accomplish. According to the Preamble, the people of the United States have come together as a political body with five goals in mind: establish peace, ensure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty. America's constitutional order is not oriented to man's heavenly good. It is designed to keep people safe,

peaceable, prosperous, and free. That's why I appreciate the candor of the Christian Nationalists who admit that their program requires a near total scrapping of our Constitutional framework.

Last year I wrote an article detailing Robert Dabney's argument against church establishments. These two paragraphs about limited government summarize the point I'm trying to make.

> *Dabney disagrees with [William] Gladstone's contention that the proper end of human government is to foster the welfare of human beings in all things. Dabney calls this the to pan (Greek for "everything") view of civil government, and he rejects it for three reasons: Romans 13:4 teaches otherwise; it is utterly impractical; and it renders every association of human beings an extension of the state.*
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> *Dabney is especially exercised by this last point. If the proper object of the state is the whole welfare of man, including his highest and ultimate good, then there is no family and no church that exists originally and independently of the state. "The parent is but the delegate of the government" as the government concerns itself with man's summum bonum in all things, including the family. Likewise, "ecclesiastical persons and assemblies are but magistrates engaged in one part of their functions" (ST, 882). The state that is, by its very nature and object, designed to be concerned with the whole welfare of man, is a state that can, and must, interfere in everything.*

I know that many of my friends with an appreciation for Christian Nationalism also appreciate Thomas Sowell (b. 1930). I would urge them to recall Sowell's distinction between the unconstrained vision of human nature and the constrained vision. Progressives tend to have an unconstrained view of human nature, believing in the great things government can achieve when human beings work together, freed from the ills of poverty, prejudice, and ignorance. Conservatives, on the other hand, usually hold to a constrained view of the human person, believing that human beings are inherently flawed, prone to abuse authority and mistreat others. I fail to see how the vision of Christian Nationalism, with its insistence that government ought to be concerned with the whole perfection of man, fits with a constrained view of human nature and accounts for the inherent corruption in every human heart (including, and maybe especially, in the hearts of those who exercise power over others).

Along these lines, I've said before that there are two ways we can conceive of civil government.

One way is to think of the best that government can (and should) accomplish if the right people are in charge—and then to design a government toward that grand end.

The other way is to think of all the worst that government can (and often does) pursue because human beings are selfish and corrupt—and then to design a government that will frustrate these inclinations.

The American founding—with its emphasis on liberty, equality, and freedom—was oriented more toward the latter than the former. This is why James Madison wrote in *Federalist* No. 51 about the need for ambition to counteract ambition and for a realistic recognition that government will not be run by angels. The French Revolution may have believed in the

perfectibility of man, but the American founders designed a government with imperfect human beings in mind.

I do not want government to direct its citizens to the highest, heavenly good, or to order society around true religion, because I do not trust the government to determine true religion from false religion, and because I do not trust human beings to wield this kind of authority well or wisely. I hold these convictions not in avoidance of Calvinist theology, but precisely because I am a Calvinist. A Reformed understanding of human nature should lead one to grant the civil magistrate *less* power in matters of religion, not more.

Question #4: What does it mean for the civil magistrate to promote the true religion?

Some recent proposals, instead of using the language of Christian Nationalism, have called more generally for the civil magistrate to *promote* true religion. I grant that one can argue for the "promotion" position without being a Christian Nationalist. The circles are overlapping but not identical. Nevertheless, I think the question is important in trying to determine what "promote" means and whether it is, in the end, much different from various Christian Nationalism proposals.

The argument, specifically as it relates to Presbyterians, is that even if American Presbyterians at the end of the eighteenth century rejected church establishments like the ones that existed in England or Scotland, they were still in favor of a "soft establishment." That is, they were in favor of a pan-Protestant establishment whereby no Protestant denomination would receive government patronage above another, but Protestant Christianity as a whole would be upheld and promoted.

There is certainly some truth to this historical claim. The Presbyterians who revised the Westminster Confession of Faith in 1788 still assumed that the civil magistrate would be Christian and that Protestant Christianity would have a privileged place in the new American republic. They were not secularists or mere proceduralists. But I wouldn't call their view a "soft establishment" because these Presbyterians equated the establishment principle with the specter of Anglican hegemony they were trying to prevent. In explaining the revisions to the Confession in 1788, and how the delegates approved a new understanding of the civil magistrate, Ashbel Green observed that governmental patronage for the church would be "a calamity and a curse." Likewise, Samuel Miller celebrated God's blessings to America in giving them "a land where the people, under God, are supreme" and "where we have no ecclesiastical establishments." Protestant Christianity may have been a public truth and a privileged truth, but Presbyterians did not want an established church of any kind.

But that still leaves the question of whether the civil magistrate ought to *promote* true religion. That depends, of course, on what is meant by "promote." Does "promote" mean that the magistrate must have a sincere devotion to Christ? Be a regular churchgoer? Have a credible profession of faith? Adorn the gospel by his behavior? Speak of Christ and the Christian faith publicly and warmly? I am in favor of all these things, as God has called all Christians to these things. I want the civil magistrate to be a Christian, and to be an exemplary one at that.

And yet, I suspect that "promote" is meant to entail more than this. But what? Calling for days of prayer and fasting? Giving fireside chats at Christmas that speak about the good news of Christ's birth? Defending the rights of conscience and religious liberty? Establishing a military chaplain corps? Tax breaks for churches and clergy? I like all that.

Or does "promote" mean supporting churches and ministers from tax revenue? Making religious tests of office? Reforming the church so that its worship, discipline, and doctrine are in line with God's word? Shutting down churches and religious assemblies that are false and idolatrous? These are bad ideas in my estimation. I *might* agree with "promote," but the devil is in the details.

I've written twice about the American revisions to the Westminster Confession of Faith to reflect a new understanding of the civil magistrate. I know that some people see more continuity between the 1646 Confession and the 1788 Confession. Others have argued that just because the American revision removed something from the original Confession does not mean that what is removed is now forbidden. I think the two versions of the confession, as they relate to the civil magistrate, are mutually exclusive at points, but even if those arguing for more continuity are correct, we still must face the question squarely: What is the civil magistrate supposed to do?

I know I'm speaking specifically to Presbyterians at this point, but these are important questions to ask ourselves and the officers in our churches.

- Do you believe that the civil magistrate must take order that unity and peace be preserved in the church?
- Do you believe that the civil magistrate must take order so that the truth of God be kept pure and blameless?
- Do you believe that the civil magistrate must take order so that all blasphemies and heresies are suppressed?
- Do you believe that the civil magistrate must take order so that all corruptions and abuses in worship and discipline are prevented or reformed?
- Do you believe that the civil magistrate must take order so that the ordinances of God are duly settled, administered, and observed?
- Do you believe that the civil magistrate has power to call ecclesiastical synods?
- Do you believe that the civil magistrate has power to ensure that whatever is transacted at an ecclesiastical synod is according to the mind of God?
- Do you believe that those who make public such opinions—or maintain such practices—that are contrary to the light of nature or the known principles of Christianity as they relate to faith, worship, and conversation may be prosecuted by the power of the civil magistrate?

The original version of the Westminster Confession (1646) called for *all* of these things, and the American revision of the Confession (1788) removed *all* of these lines. If the word "promote" entails any of the above—and these *were* the means by which the Westminster divines believed the magistrate was to promote the Reformed faith—then I am against the civil magistrate "promoting" true religion.

Every political leader must give an account to Christ of his beliefs and behaviors. That is true for all human beings. But once we insist that the government should be in the business of promoting true religion—as the Westminster divines understood that task—we are left with the question of who determines what *is* the true religion. We can say that we know what the true religion is, and that, of course, is what the civil magistrate must promote. But the clear record of history demonstrates that human beings will *not* agree on how ultimate spiritual and metaphysical questions should be answered. To require human government to promote the true religion is to expect that government is competent to answer these questions. The result will be something closer to "might makes right" than to the enlightened rule of godly magistrates directing each of us to our heavenly good. A better approach, which most Christians and most Westerners came to discover, is to take government out of the business of discerning (and then promoting) the answers to life's most important questions.

I believe the magistrate ought to maintain piety, justice, and peace (WCF 23.2). And I believe he accomplishes these ends by protecting the church without giving preference to any denomination, by ensuring that ecclesiastical persons shall enjoy the unquestioned liberty of discharging every part of their sacred functions, by protecting the person and good name of all people (even unbelievers), and by taking order so that all religious assembles can do their work without disturbance (WCF 23.3). Likewise, I believe that the civil magistrate must not enact any laws that interfere with the due exercise of the church's government, discipline, and worship (WCF 23.3). In short, I believe the civil magistrate may not "in the least, interfere in matters of faith" (WCF 23.3).

Question #5: Was the First Amendment a mistake?

If I had only one question to ask a proponent of Christian Nationalism, this would be my first: What do you believe about the First Amendment? Granted, many of my Christian heroes from the past would not have agreed with the principle of religious freedom enshrined in the First Amendment. The Bible does not mandate the First Amendment (though I think it can be supported from, and arises out of, Christian principles). The reason I would start here is that increasingly, I think the issue of the First Amendment is the quickest way to determine what kind of Christian Nationalism we are talking about.

By the First Amendment, I don't mean the *abuses* of the First Amendment. This original intent of the establishment clause was not to remove Christian symbols from the public square, or to install a secular government untainted by religion, or to erect—in the words of the infamous *Everson* (1947) decision—a "high and impregnable" wall between church and state. Virtually no one at the founding conceived of a political and social order devoid of religion. The purpose of the establishment clause was not to create a strict separation between church and state, nor even to enforce a studied neutrality, but to ensure that religious minorities were accommodated and that religious pluralism was protected in a large commercial republic.

My interest in asking the First Amendment question is not about the establishment clause but about the free exercise clause. The two clauses should not be confused. I am entirely in agreement with those who want to recover an originalist understanding of the establishment clause and push back on the mistaken notion that the Constitution meant to excise religion from public and political life. But in making this correction, we must not forget that the First Amendment protects more than private belief. It ensures the *free exercise* of religion. What I want to know is whether Christian Nationalists think this First Amendment protection extends to *all* citizens of whatever religion.

I want to go back one more time to the aforementioned article from Doug Wilson about Christian Nationalism. Wilson defends freedom of religion, but only to a point. He writes:

> *The doctrine of religious liberty is elastic, and can be stretched to accommodate a number of options within a broad Christian consensus. But religious liberty cannot accommodate jihadists flying planes into skyscrapers, or Aztec priests slaughtering prisoners on ziggurats, or child prostitution in Hindu temples, or Islamic honor killings. Human religiosity has at many times been beyond grotesque, and we cannot hide that fact with the thin whitewash of secular liberal bromides about the blessings of "religious liberty"—if you want to pretend that the differences between the Muslim Brotherhood and Presbyterians is comparable to the differences between Baptists and Presbyterians, then you deserve everything that is coming your way, good and hard.*

Look at the four examples Wilson cites:

- Jihadists flying planes into skyscrapers,
- Aztec priests slaughtering prisoners,
- child prostitution in Hindu temples, and
- Islamic honor killings.

The rhetorical force of these examples leads the reader to conclude, "I guess religious liberty must have serious limitations." But all four examples cite activity that is already, and has always been, illegal. No one thinks religious liberty is a blank check to do anything you want because you claim it is a part of your religion. When the federal Constitution was written, most of the state constitutions had already spelled out that the rights of conscience were not to interfere with the peace and safety of others.

Following these examples, Wilson chides anyone who thinks that the differences between the Muslim Brotherhood and Presbyterians are comparable to the differences between Baptists and Presbyterians. Again, I don't know anyone who thinks those are comparable differences. Note also that Wilson cites the Muslim Brotherhood, an organization of militant revolutionaries, instead of Muslims in general. If Wilson's point is that religious liberty does not protect murderers, terrorists, and sex traffickers, then of course he is right.

But those examples distract from the more pressing question: What about *non-terrorist* Muslims and *not-in-the-practice-of-child-prostitution* Hindus—are they protected by the First Amendment? I am not sure what Wilson would say, but I'm pretty sure many Christian Nationalists believe that peaceable Muslims are *not* protected. Someone may argue at this point, "Yeah, but the First Amendment didn't envision over 2,700 mosques in America." True, and the Second Amendment didn't envision the AK-47 and 400 million guns in the country. But conservatives believe the principle of the Second Amendment still applies in a different cultural reality. Conservatives ought to believe that the principle of the First Amendment still applies too.

This doesn't mean that every religion can function in this country as it might in another country. Muslim worship and practice, for example, if it is to be protected in America, must in some measure be an Americanized Islam, not an Islam transplanted wholesale from Saudi Arabia. Nations are right to want to preserve a sense of national identity and to insist that newcomers embrace something of their new nation's story and tradition. Nations also have the right to secure their borders and to establish immigration restrictions. These are commitments that many countries in the West have ignored to their peril.

These commitments, however, do not have to be at odds with continuing support for the First Amendment. It is hard to conceive of America as America without the aspirations articulated in the Declaration and the freedoms protected in the Constitution. The political genius of the founders was their conclusion that rather than entrusting government with the responsibility to separate true religion from false religion, we ought to make sure that government does not interfere with the free exercise of everyone's religion. As Michael McConnell puts it:

> *The free exercise clause guarantees the widest possible scope for religious activity, consistent with peace and safety, and the establishment clause ensures that religious activity is purely voluntary. The result is a religiously pluralistic society, with a religious tradition stronger than that of virtually any other Western nation. (The Bill of Rights: Original Meaning and Current Context, 67)*

Of course, the American Constitution is not a divinely inspired document (although Alexander McWhorter, one of the Presbyterian pastors who helped draft the revisions to the Westminster Confession, called it a "our glorious Civil Constitution," a "wonder-working Constitution," and a "transcendently excellent Constitution"). But raising the issue of the First Amendment helps put possible differences into starker contrast. Christians who, despite America's many failures, want to preserve our constitutional order deserve to be called *conservatives*, in the spirit of Edmund Burke who recognized that those who inherit a civilizational tradition tear it down at great risk to themselves and to others. Those who want to move past the Constitution and make America's state-church dynamic look like sixteenth-century Geneva or Medieval Catholic Europe, are more properly labeled *revolutionaries*. They are pining for an arrangement that has never existed in our political order and are envisioning a new sort of nation that would no longer be discernibly American.

If all sides acknowledge that America is less Christian and less religious than it used to be, that doesn't answer the question of what Christians should (and should not) do about this new reality. Consider this observation from Timon Cline:

> *[John] Adams feared that the American people lacked the requisite civic virtue (morality and religion) appropriate to the chosen constitutional order. It is Adams' worries that have never been directly approached in earnest. Instead, the morality and religion of the people have been permitted to continually degenerate. The NCR [new Christian right] is acutely aware of this oversight and is interested in its rectification.*

I agree with the founders (and with Cline) that virtue is necessary for our constitutional order and that true virtue comes from the Christian faith. My question is what Cline means when he says that American morality and religion have been "permitted" to degenerate. Is he speaking of "permission" in a general sense, merely indicating what has transpired over the years? Or is he thinking of permission more specifically as something that government has wrongly allowed and, therefore, ought to be remedied by legislative means? I believe rectification happens by strong churches, by strong families, by strong institutions, by adorning the gospel with good deeds, and by defending our constitutionally protected freedoms. What I don't think it entails is calling upon the government to make irreligion and non-Christian religions impermissible.

Once again, Dabney's voice from the nineteenth century is instructive. Dabney acknowledged that "the doctrine of religious liberty was not evolved at the Reformation" and that "Protestants held it a right and duty to persecute heretics" (*ST*, 879). For Dabney, this admission was not a reason to reject the American understanding of religious liberty but to celebrate it. "The separation and independence of Church and State was not only not the doctrine of the Reformation. No Christian nation holds it to this day, except ours" (*ST*, 880). If America's experiment in church-state relations was novel, so be it. In Dabney's mind, America was right, while others had not sufficiently evolved in their thinking.

Someone may still argue, "But the First Amendment was about not picking and choosing among various Protestant denominations." True, that's *part* of what the First Amendment was about, but we can't reduce the First Amendment to a Protestant protection clause. There were Catholics in America at the time of the Constitution (one of them signed the Declaration of Independence). There were also Jews, to whom George Washington wrote in 1790, assuring the Hebrew congregation in Newport, Rhode Island that they too possessed "liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship." For the government of the United States, Washington wrote, "gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance [but] requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens, in giving it on all occasions their effectual support."

Religious freedom was the evolution of a Protestant idea that, even at the time of the founding, was not limited to Protestants. And this is to say nothing of the presence today of millions of Mormons, Oneness Pentecostals, and Jehovah's Witnesses, all of whom are not Christians by any historic standard. If Christian Nationalists believe the First Amendment only protects orthodox Protestants (and maybe, begrudgingly, Catholics and Jews), then surely these newer heretical groups—none of which were envisioned by the founders—should be suppressed. I suggest, however, as an American and as a Christian, that the better way is to pray, preach, and proselytize for the conversion of these religious groups, while also defending their right to exercise their false religion during this temporal order.

Question #6: What is the historical example of the political order you would like to see in America?

For my part, I think the political order established at the American founding—with its threefold cordof Lockean liberalism, classic republicanism, and Protestant Christianity—is worth preserving and celebrating. I also like Miles Smith's argument for "Christian institutionalism" and his contention that religion in the early American republic was disestablished but not disentangled. I would also add to these ideas something like Russell Kirk's ten characteristics of conservative thought and Robert George's nine point summary of conservatism.

I ask this sixth and final question because I find that Christian Nationalists do not at all agree on what model they actually want to implement. I hear them talk positively about medieval Christendom, and the view of the magisterial Reformers, and the American founding, and Kupyerianism as if these were all basically saying the same thing. But Christian political thought has been far from static. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Protestants envisioned a strong and reform-minded civil magistrate, in part, because they needed a magistrate to do what the papacy and the Catholic Church said they were not allowed to do. As various Protestant groups grew wary of jockeying among themselves (and with Catholics) for political power, notions of tolerance and liberty began to look more attractive. Even specifically Reformed thought splintered and evolved. As Miles Smith has observed, "Differences among British Reformed Protestants—the Scots and the English approached political theology differently—and between Britons and their French, German, Hungarian, and Swiss Reformed brethren meant significantly different conceptions of the state marked international Calvinism. Those differences increased during the Glorious Revolution, American Revolution, and the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars."

Over and over, during the Reformation and in the decades that followed, attempts to implement widespread religious uniformity ran into a brick wall. After Protestants were defeated by the Catholics in the Second War of Kappel (1531), during which Zwingli was killed, both sides agreed to let individual Cantons determine their religion rather than fighting for a religiously unified Swiss Confederacy. In 1555, the Holy Roman Empire came to the same conclusion with the Peace of Augsburg's "*Cuius regio, eius religio*" principle which enabled each prince to determine the religion of his realm. I mention these 500-year-old examples to show that even if the Magisterial Reformers had the correct view of church and state, it proved to be one that had to be applied to smaller and smaller locales. If the Reformers' view of the civil magistrate could barely work in a small city of people with the same language, history, and ethnicity, what makes us think their views could ever work in a modern nation-state with tens of millions of people?

Consider Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920), for example, and his Neo-Calvinist vision for the Netherlands at the turn of the twentieth century. In 1900, the Netherlands had a population of around 5 million people. The Dutch were ethnically and culturally homogenous by today's standards and occupied a slice of land about the size of Maryland and Delaware. And yet, even then, in a small country with a shared language and history, Kuyper advocated a principled pluralism, which meant that competing worldviews had the right to compete in the public square, even though they were not all equally true. To be sure, Kuyper did not want a naked public square. Believing there was "no neutrality" in worldviews, he understood that secularism was its

own kind of religion. But his response to the conditions of modernity was to insist on "sphere sovereignty," the contention that society has multiple spheres of activity, and each one exists independently with its own set of rules and ideas, and each one is connected to God. This was not a godless vision for a secular state. But it was a vision for "a free church in a free state" where government did not trespass into the spheres of family, religion, and the marketplace. Government's responsibility was to ensure that good order was kept, rights were protected, and all were treated fairly.

I'm not suggesting that Kuyper provides the best model for America. There are things we can learn from him and other parts of his project that don't transfer well to another time and place. I bring up Kuyper because those in favor of Christian Nationalism sometimes laud Kuyperianism without really understanding what Kuyper was (and wasn't) trying to accomplish. One of the things Kuyper admitted freely was that Reformed theologians wrongly assumed, as most Christians had since Constantine, that the duty of government was to stamp out false religion and idolatry. In laying out his political program in 1879, Kuyper stressed that he did not want to recover from the past anything "that has proved unusable, nothing that we have outgrown or that no longer fits our circumstances." He steadfastly opposed re-establishing a Reformed state church. "On the contrary," he wrote, "we demand the strictest application of the principle that the state shall not itself promote 'the saving faith'" (*Our Program*, Section 11).

Kuyper argued that we ought to look at what was unique about Calvinism—its emphasis on the rights of conscience—not at the errors that it had in common with every other system. "I am forced to admit," Kuyper said in his famous Stone Lectures (1898) at Princeton, "that our fathers, in theory, had not the courage of the conclusions which follow from this liberty of conscience, for the liberty of speech and the liberty of worship must also be protected." This is an important concession, and it's why Kuyper and Bavinck led the way in revising Article 36 of the Belgic Confession on the civil magistrate. Kuyper argued that the civil magistrate should not (as Article 36 insisted) uphold the sacred ministry, "with a view to removing and destroying all idolatry and false worship of the Antichrist" and to "promoting the kingdom of Jesus Christ." Because this is the very issue that perplexes many Reformed Christians today, it is worth reading the six points Kuyper made, quite strenuously, in opposition to his own Confession:

> *We oppose this Confession out of complete conviction, prepared to bear the consequences of our convictions, even when we will be denounced and mocked on that account as unReformed.*
>
> *We would rather be considered not Reformed and insist that men ought not to kill heretics, than that we are left with the Reformed name as the prize for assisting in the shedding of the blood of heretics.*
>
> *It is our conviction:*
>
> *1) that the examples which are found in the Old Testament are of no force for us because the infallible indication of what was or was not heretical which was present at that time is now lacking.*

2) That the Lord and the Apostles never called upon the help of the magistrate to kill with the sword the one who deviated from the truth. Even in connection with such horrible heretics as defiled the congregation in Corinth, Paul mentions nothing of this idea. And it cannot be concluded from any particular word in the New Testament, that in the days when particular revelation should cease, that the rooting out of heretics with the sword is the obligation of magistrates.

3) That our fathers have not developed this monstrous proposition out of principle, but have taken it over from Romish practice.

4) That the acceptance and carrying out of this principle almost always has returned upon the heads of non-heretics and not the truth but heresy has been honored by the magistrate.

5) That this proposition opposes the Spirit and the Christian faith.

6) That this proposition supposed that the magistrate is in a position to judge the difference between truth and heresy, an office of grace which, as appears from the history of eighteen centuries, is not granted by the Holy Spirit, but is withheld.

We do not at all hide the fact that we disagree with Calvin, our Confessions, and our Reformed theologians.

The same arguments are made by Herman Bavinck (1854–1921) in his *Social Ethics*, where he insists that good and evil will grow up side-by-side in this world and that the civil authority is not given the divine guidance necessary to separate the wheat from the chaff (137). If Reformed Christians today wish to do theological retrieval, we should do it as Kuyper and Bavinck did and admit when our forefathers got something wrong, or at least when they did not have the courage of the conclusions that followed from their better principles.

Conclusion: The Politics of Possibility

This brings me to a concluding practical point. Political theology is not like the doctrine of the Trinity or the two natures of Christ. It has not been codified for almost two millennia, it does not sit at the heart of the gospel, and it does not demand the same application and expression in every century. To maintain that Calvin's Geneva is neither doable nor desirable as a political model for our day does not make one a progressive. It makes one a realist—about our times and about human nature. Much of what is triumphantly bandied about under the banner of Christian Nationalism is the product of a digital echo-chamber that bears little resemblance to what regular churchgoers talk about, let alone what the rest of the non-Christian population in a democratic nation would ever countenance. Part of believing in God's providence is dealing with the history and development of the nation God has given us, not wishing for a political order that existed somewhere else long ago (and wasn't nearly as successful as some people would like to remember it).

Moreover, those with the most outlandish proposals are the ones farthest from any levers of power and most distant from any established institution or in-person constituency. Hosting a

podcast does not a political prophet make. We are not getting rid of the First Amendment. We are not overturning the Nineteenth Amendment either. America is not going to become a general equity theonomic republic. Presbyterians are not going to rule America as if we were in seventeenth-century Scotland (and that project had a *lot* of ups and downs). Likewise, there is no political will beyond the outer reaches of social media for shutting down every mosque and every Hindu temple, let alone every Catholic congregation, every Jewish synagogue, and every Mormon house of worship. And if the above views were widely known, they would be roundly and resolutely condemned. There's a reason liberal news organizations like to highlight Christian Nationalists: they know that most of their views are repugnant to most Americans.

To be sure, there are serious theological conversations taking place that should continue, but these are also conversations about political prescriptions that have zero chance of being enacted. I hear some Christian voices expressing outrage that idolatrous worship is tolerated in our nation, but no one is ever pressed on the details of what it would look like to no longer grant legal toleration to false religions. Do we bulldoze the Buddhist temple immediately? Do we arrest the worshipers on the spot or merely fine them? And should we only suppress foreign religions and target those who don't look like *real* Americans? Or are Catholics, Jews, and liberal Christians fair game too? I don't want to minimize that the rhetoric can be disturbing, but a lot of the Christian Nationalism cacophony is sound and fury signifying nothing. It is easy to seem visionary and fearless when your ideas have the intellectual luxury of impossibility.

To be sure, some postmillennialists may say we are only playing the long game and laying the groundwork for a glorious future to come centuries from now. Even if postmillennialism were true (and there are good reasons to question whether it is biblical), that doesn't change the fact that politics is about the art of the possible. When some Christians wax eloquent about the need for a Protestant Franco or about why we should take the vote away from women or about why the civil magistrate should crush idolatrous worship, they aren't laying down a constructive alternative to progressivism. They are alienating normal people and stirring up division in the church.

In the process, too many ministers have equated cultural engagement with non-stop online punditry and have mistaken the mission of the church for whatever everyone is talking about right now. Fifteen years ago, that meant redeeming the city, with a host of concerns coded for the left. Today that means ruling over the nation, with a host of concerns coded for the right. When I talked about the mission of the church a decade ago, it was a message that voices on the right appreciated. Now that there seems to be momentum to support political concerns on the right (and I share most of these concerns), the accusation is that those who refuse to mobilize the ministry for partisan politics don't know what time it is. I still believe what I have always believed about the mission of the church, and I still believe amidst a new round of cries—this time from the right instead of the left, that we all must "Do something!" and "Say something!"—that it's okay for pastors to still be pastors.

If the appeal at the present moment were simply for strong Christian institutions, for good churches, for new and better schools, or for Christians to get involved in politics, then we might be on to something. But the talk is about Christian *National*ism. The reality is that if a nation the size of a continent, with over 330 million people, tried to eradicate religious freedom and moved to a sixteenth-century model of the civil magistrate, the "cure" for religious pluralism would kill

the patient more than the disease. The alternative to the First Amendment is not the glorious sunlit uplands of enlightened national Presbyterianism; the alternative is Soviet Russia or Communist China—a statist system that spies on its people, violently oppresses dissent, and interposes the reach of government coercion into every area of life. Remember that every attempt in the history of the world to realize heaven on earth has produced absolutely hellish results.

Until we come to the end of the age and the kingdom of the world becomes the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, we will have to be content with the church as our kingdom outpost and with a government (in the best of cases) that punishes evil, protects the innocent, upholds the dignity and equality of all persons, defends the rights of conscience and the freedom of religious expression, and allows men and women to pursue the good as they understand it.

If you are blessed to live in a nation with this sort of political tradition, you are likely in a nation that has been indelibly shaped by Christianity. I pray that this Christian influence continues and grows in America. I want more Christian institutions, more Christian ideas in the public square, and more sincere and wise Christians in positions of power. I am for all of that in spades. What I am not for is asking the civil magistrate to adjudicate questions it is not competent to answer, to wield power it cannot be trusted to exercise, and to fulfill duties that infringe upon the liberty of a free people.

Kevin DeYoung is the senior pastor at Christ Covenant Church (PCA) in Matthews, North Carolina and associate professor of systematic theology at Reformed Theological Seminary.