SOJOURNERS

SPECIAL ISSUE

COUNTERING CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM

LOVING GOD AND NEIGHBOR IN POLARIZING TIMES

WILLIAM J. BARBER II
JENNIFER GARCIA BASHAW
MATTHEW HILDRETH
LISA JACOB
TONY TIAN-REN LIN
DIANA OESTREICH
AMAR D. PETERMAN
SOONG-CHAN RAH
CARLOS A. RODRÍGUEZ
JAMES SPENCER
ADAM RUSSELL TAYLOR
AMANDA TYLER



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faith in action for social justice

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CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM *is anything but* CHRISTIAN

Christian Nationalism is a direct threat to every individual's right to practice their personal beliefs. The goal of Christian Nationalism is to corrupt a small divisive subsect of Christianity and use its power to control the American people.

It's time for people of all faiths to stand up against Christian Nationalism and refuse to let our personal beliefs be abused and used to wield power over our friends and neighbors.



Scan or visit **au.org/sojourners** to learn more about how to prevent the spread of Christian Nationalism.

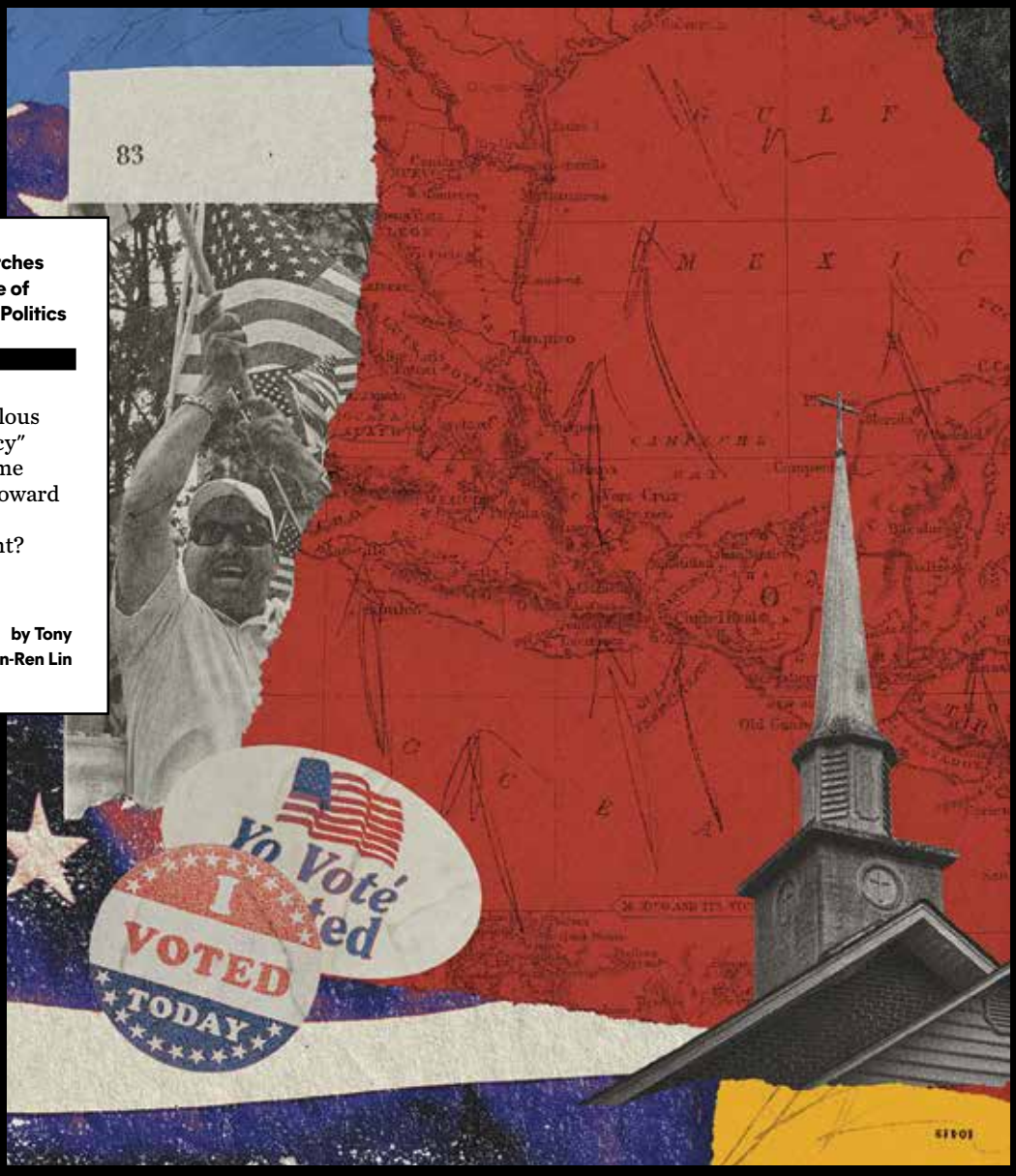
AMERICANS UNITED
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"CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM USES GOD TO BLESS HUMAN AMBITION FOR POWER."

Latino Churches and the Rise of Right-Wing Politics

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On Reading Samuel

Kingdoms rage;
empires tremble;
cities totter.
You speak assurance;
you designate human agents;
you say, “This is my beloved Son”;
you say, “This is my anointed.”
Right in the middle of chaos,
you designate human agents who do your will.
And we are not sure:
We would rather it were you,
directly,
straight on and visible.
But you stay hidden in your holy splendor,
and we are left with human agents
about whom we are never sure.
So we name Jesus, “Son of David”;
so human and frail, even if kicked upstairs;
so vulnerable, even if transformed in song
and creed.
And then, in a flash, it may dawn on us:
You call and designate people like us, your agents.
Kingdoms rage ... and we are called;
empires tremble ... and we are designated;
cities totter ... and we are summoned ...
like the first David, like the second David ...
us vulnerable, frail, anxious, your people.
And we are dazzled. Amen.

Walter Brueggemann, from *Waiting In Gratitude: Prayers of Joy* (Westminster John Knox, 2024). Reprinted with permission.

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From the Editors

This special issue of *Sojourners* focuses on Christian nationalism—what it is, why it matters, and how we can address this rising force.

Sojourners' president Adam Russell Taylor (p.9) introduces the dangers of Christian nationalism and how some are responding. Amanda Tyler, executive director of Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty and author of the forthcoming book *How To End Christian Nationalism*, further defines the threat to democracy and religious liberty (p.14), but also offers the assurance that "working to end Christian nationalism does not mean working to end Christian expression in the public square." It's about *how* we bring our faith to civic engagement.

Our feature section (p.20) opens with several perspectives on how to understand and confront Christian nationalism. Fuller Seminary professor Soong-Chan Rah then explores how the Pentecost story in Acts calls the church to self-sacrificial service, rather than the blind pursuit of power. Finally, sociologist Tony Tian-Ren Lin analyzes myths and facts about how faith intersects with right-wing politics among Latino Christians and other communities of color.

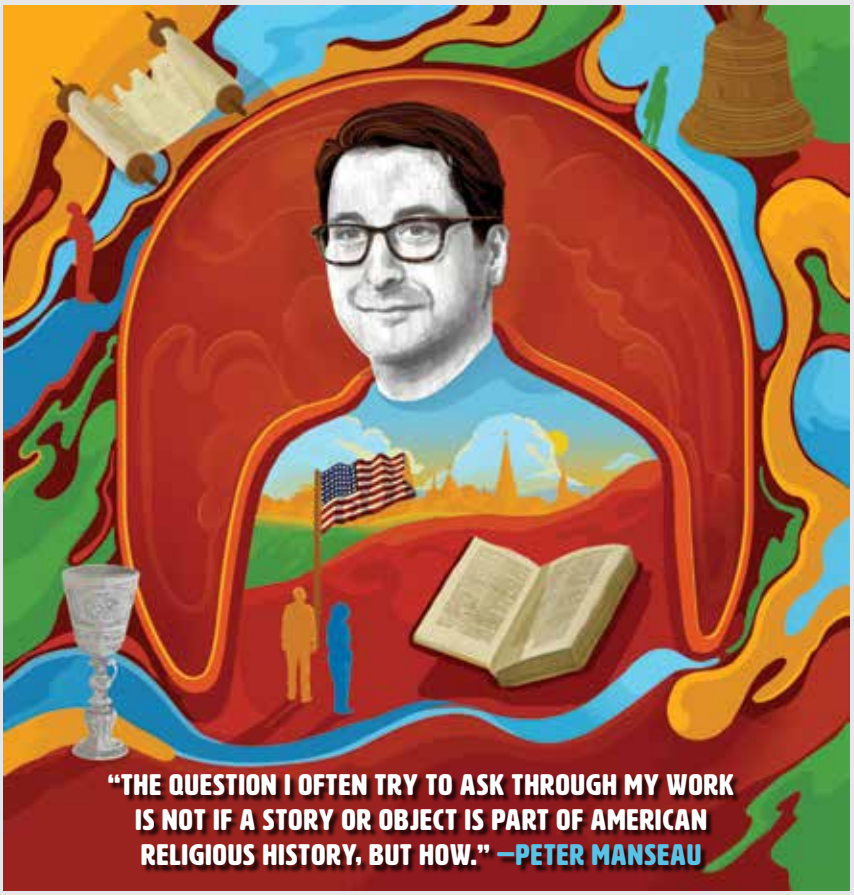
Thank you to the Luce Foundation for support that helped make this special issue possible. *Sojourners* magazine retains full authority over editorial content.

RESPONSE

Authoritarianism Was on Your Minds, Too

Given that more than 50 countries—representing half of humanity—will have held national elections by the end of 2024, it is perhaps unsurprising that we received several reader comments in response to our July 2024 cover story, Maria J. Stephan's "Faith and the Authoritarian Playbook." Robert Murphy shared gratitude for Stephan's essay, writing, "It will be needed in the months ahead." Marjorie Craig called the article "one of the most comprehensive, analytical article[s] on authoritarianism I have read." And Ruth Louise Kverndal commented, "I am 94, following along, and praying for all the wonderful movements and individuals depicted in this writing."

Write us: response@sojo.net



Peter Manseau is a novelist, historian, and founding director of the Smithsonian National Museum of American History's Center for the Understanding of Religion in American History. / Illustration by Sam Falconer

"SURROUNDED BY EMPIRE, HOW DOES MY LIFE PROCLAIM 'GOD IS LOVE'?"

Cassidy Klein
Writer

CONTRIBUTING



Tony Tian-Ren Lin
Born in Taiwan, raised in Argentina, and now living in New York City, Tony Tian-Ren Lin (p.32) is "a cultural sociologist trying to understand the many manifestations of religions in the modern world." He has a complicated relationship with "cosmetic multiculturalism," in a time when "everything is commodified, even race," saying "it's never good when those made in the image of God *become* goods." He relishes the Argentinian trinity of joy, *fútbol*, *mate*, and *asado*, because they are best enjoyed in community.



Kaeley McEvoy
"Former pastor and current playful prophet," Kaeley McEvoy (p. 41) is "listening to sermons from the squash flowers in the community garden" near her house. As director of the Sojourners Fellowship program and Sojourners staff chaplain, she is "passionate about building community and sustaining life through relationships," and has recently been enjoying women's professional sports, specifically the Washington Spirit and the Connecticut Sun.

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MOBILIZING HOPE BY ADAM RUSSELL TAYLOR

CONFRONTING A RISING PERIL

Counteracting Christian nationalism can feel like political shadowboxing: The thing you are trying to push back against feels elusive, moving like a butterfly but stinging like a bee. It's somehow both everywhere and staying under cover. With rare exceptions, such as Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene and Sen. Josh Hawley, few politicians or even Christian leaders self-identify as Christian nationalists. Far-Right Christian leaders such as Tony Perkins have even argued that Christian nationalism is an invention by the Left and academics to marginalize Christian conservatives. But we can't be fooled. The peril that Christian nationalism poses to our Christian witness and faith *and* to our democracy is real.

One challenge in confronting Christian nationalism is succinctly defining it. Sociologists Samuel L. Perry

* * *

WE COUNTER CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM THROUGH TRUTH-TELLING, BRAVE DIALOGUE, BOLD ORGANIZING, AND BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS.

Illustration by Nico Ortega

CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM EXISTS ON A SPECTRUM.

and Philip S. Gorski talk about it as "a constellation of beliefs"—such as that the founding of the United States was "divinely inspired"—that are connected to political goals. Another challenge is that Christian nationalism exists on a spectrum, from the quiet but insidious kind that has seeped into many of our churches to the louder, more overt forms we saw on January 6. It has been present in groups throughout our history, from the Ku Klux Klan to the Religious Right to a powerful constituency now helping fuel the MAGA movement. It can be an ideology that asserts that a specific ethno-nationalist brand of Christianity, intertwined with white supremacy, patriarchy, and xenophobia, is the one true faith. And it is a strategy being harnessed to build political power and undermine our democracy. Project 2025, made in collaboration with more than 100 Far-Right organizations, provides a chilling policy and governing blueprint that embraces many tenets of Christian nationalism and would push our nation toward autocracy. We need a variety of approaches to address this continuum.

Fortunately, a broad cross section of faith-based and secular organizations are working to educate people and draw as many as possible away from this ideology and heresy. For example, the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty pulled together a coalition of faith groups and leaders to form Christians Against Christian Nationalism, which has created resources to help congregations understand and confront nationalism. An initiative co-led by MoveOn Education Fund and the Kairos Center generated the "All of U.S." report, a comprehensive roadmap for faith-based and secular civil society to counter Christian nationalism by using tactics such as "fully integrating faith communities and faith leaders into a pro-democracy movement" and claiming "a long-arc moral vision that includes everyone."

A growing body of literature equips Christians to understand the threat and disciple people away from the idolatry of Christian nationalism. Helpful books include Kristin Kobes Du Mez's *Jesus and John Wayne,* Jim Wallis' *The False White Gospel,* and Jemar Tisby's *The Color of Compromise*.

We must be relentless in countering Christian nationalism's malignant influence. We will do that *not* by demonizing its adherents, but through truth-telling, brave dialogue, bold organizing, and building relationships. We must sharpen our strategy and grow a movement to replace Christian nationalism with the civic ideal of "liberty and justice" for all. And we must speak from our deepest held religious convictions to affirm the dignity of everyone, protect the most vulnerable, and advance the common good. ⊗



Adam Russell Taylor is president of Sojourners.

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Rev. Dontá McGilvery, left, and Pastor April Hawkins as poll chaplains in 2022 in Arizona. / Photo courtesy of McGilvery

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FAITHS UNITED to SAVE DEMOCRACY

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COMMENTARY

BY DWAYNE DAVID PAUL

VULNERABILITY, ROACHES, AND MYSTICAL ENCOUNTERS

Is shared work for justice a doorway to the divine?



Olha Khorimarko / iStock

God seized Isabella on Pentecost 1826. Isabella Baumfree, born in slaveholding New York, had secured her freedom. But, in despair for her children, she "looked back into Egypt." On the verge of returning herself to slavery, God's spirit overtook her in a mystical encounter that changed her life.

This thunderclap of God's grandeur surpassed any notions of the divine she had previously acquired. This God, at once familiar and foreign, called Isabella to abandon the faith of her owners. But God also called her to transform the faith inherited from her mother, who taught that survival consisted of equal parts prayer and submission to enslavement. As Isabella recovered from this mystical encounter her only words were, "Oh, God, I did not know you were so big."

Seventeen years later, Isabella had another mystical experience. After having been swindled out of her savings, she struggled to rebuild financial stability in New York City. She asked herself why, "for all her unwearied labors," did she have nothing to show? Why did

others, with much less work and anxiety, "hoard up treasures for themselves and children"? As she reflected on the economic hardship she witnessed, she realized, "the rich rob the poor and the poor rob one another." With this insight, the political roots of her religious transformation took hold. From that time forward she claimed a new name: Sojourner Truth. And began her career as a traveling preacher and activist.

The contrast between the two episodes is a helpful reminder that God is in the extraordinary and the mundane alike. Sojourner Truth joined a long line of African American Christians whose religious experiences inspire them to fight for justice as an expression of personal faith. Theologian Joy R. Bostic calls this a tradition of "mystical activism" to include the liberatory politics that follow spiritual revelation.

Christian mystical experiences are typically described as solitary—even if the fruits of those experiences feed our common life. Today, atomized as we are, we could benefit from reversing that order: I suspect that God is waiting for us in the collective work of justice itself. In that process, we could have our own conversions through experiences of "social mysticism." Here, deep encounters with the divine are facilitated by the shared labor that is necessary to cultivate justice.

I am a leader in the Greater Hartford Interfaith Action Alliance, a faith-based community organizing collective in Connecticut. The alliance is a multifaith blend of 52 urban and suburban (an important proxy for race and class in our locale) congregations. Using the process and principles of broad-based organizing, we work on justice issues where there is theological common ground.

We are not an educational project, not a book club. While some shared learning takes place, it is in service of our shared political project. The most important way we determine our work is through a storytelling process called "house meetings." Small groups gather to discuss a shared prompt, such as "What's keeping you up at night?" A notetaker and facilitator help each one have a chance to speak and they model vulnerability to keep the conversation from drifting into the abstract, like "housing is a human right." We keep it concrete: "I worry about my kid's health

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AS ANY BIBLICAL PROPHET WILL TELL YOU, THE PATH TOWARD JUSTICE IS IN THE DETAILS.

because our landlord still hasn't addressed the roach problem."

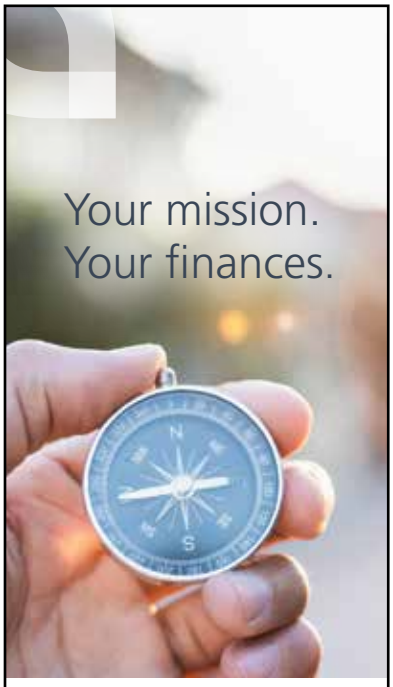
As any biblical prophet will tell you, the path toward justice is in the details. The courage to share our stories and the tender fortitude to be worthy recipients are catalysts for spiritual and political transformation. These stories uncover our shared material interests and provide grounds for incarnate politics. Our commitments as faith communities to meet as equals combined with deepening vulnerability and shared interests form the basis for solidarity. The Christian principle of solidarity requires us to treat every neighbor with dignity and actively work for their good.

In the case of the roach problem mentioned above, we can imagine other renters voicing related concerns. A 2022 survey conducted by Harvard's Joint Center for Housing Studies indicated that 43 percent of renter households worry that their homes negatively impact the health of at least one occupant. Now *that* is an opportunity for political intervention.

Community organizing is never perfect. It is always tiring. But it is also where God is waiting for us to experience the presence of the Spirit: inspiring boldness in some, humility in others, and deep regard among those our society has tried to separate.

We live in a world that brutalizes everyday people. Effective community organizing and the relationships we build in the process can transform us—but we must show up. If we do, we might encounter a God we did not know was so big. ⊗

Dwayne David Paul, co-founder of Religion in Revolt, is an educator, theologian, and faith-based community organizer in Hartford, Conn.



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COMMENTARY BY AMANDA TYLER



HOW TO BE CHRISTIAN IN THE PUBLIC SQUARE

To whom do you pledge allegiance?

If we are to end Christian nationalism, we must first develop a better idea of the threat we are facing.

Christian nationalism in the United States is a political ideology and cultural framework that seeks to fuse American and Christian identities. It suggests that "real" Americans are Christians, and that "true" Christians hold a particular set of political beliefs. It seeks to create a society in which only this narrow subset of Americans is privileged by law and in societal practice.

Christian nationalism is a gross distortion of the Christian faith that I and so many others hold dear. It employs the language, symbols, and imagery of Christianity, and it might even appear to the casual observer to be authentic Christianity.

But Christian nationalism merely uses the veneer of Christianity to advance its own aims. It points not to Jesus of Nazareth but to the nation, as conceived of by a dangerous political ideology, as the object of allegiance. When Christian symbols and language are used to appeal to order and conformity, point the intended audience to the American flag, or compel political unity under a particular leader, we have moved into the territory of Christian nationalism.

Christian nationalism is the greatest threat to religious liberty in the U.S. today, as well as a clear and present danger to our constitutional republic. It also poses an ongoing threat to the health and vitality of authentic Christian faith and practice in America.

Christian nationalism has ebbed and flowed throughout U.S. history. It has flourished when it was both a prevalent ideology *and* its adherents held political power that they used in law and policy. The same is true today: Christian nationalism is flourishing because it is a pervasive ideology *and* a well-funded political movement. Though it can be tempting to focus on the movement aspect of Christian nationalism, our efforts are better directed at dismantling the ideology.

Christian nationalism as an ideology exerts its influence along a spectrum. I'd argue that we have all been shaped by it to some degree. In their 2020 book, *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States,* sociologists Samuel L. Perry and Andrew L. Whitehead describe four different orientations toward Christian nationalism based on their research. They classify people who fully embrace and advocate for Christian nationalist ideology as ambassadors; this is the smallest group, comprising less than 20 percent of the U.S. population. At the opposite end of the spectrum from ambassadors are rejecters—people who, like me and maybe you, actively reject Christian nationalist ideology. We make up about 22 percent of the American populace. Most Americans fall somewhere in the middle. Perry and Whitehead call the folks in this central band either "accommodators" of Christian nationalism (about 32 percent of Americans) or "resisters" (about 27 percent).

However, in doing the hard work of *dismantling* ideologies, labeling people definitively as "Christian nationalist" is both counterproductive and inaccurate. We are better served by thinking of these as systemic problems that we can learn to recognize and disengage from as we work with our communities to reject them.

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In the 2023 PRRI/Brookings Institution study, the researchers identified five correlates of Christian nationalism: anti-Black racism, anti-immigrant views, antisemitic views, anti-Muslim views, and patriarchal understandings of gender roles. The more that a survey respondent embraced Christian nationalist views, the more likely they were to hold these other views. But a key finding showed that race, ethnicity, and religion made a difference as well. If someone was white and an "adherent" to Christian nationalism, in the terms of that study, they were more likely to hold anti-Black racist positions than someone who was Black and an adherent to Christian nationalism.

Recent research also shows that Americans who hold strongly to myths about the United States' supposed "Christian heritage" tend "to draw rigid boundaries around ethnic and national group membership." Such boundaries tend to exclude Muslims as a group and to be less supportive of interracial family relationships. White people who embrace Christian nationalism use ethnic boundaries, prejudice, and perceived threats to justify harsher treatment—including the use of excessive force—against racial minorities.

When people know more about Christian nationalism, they are much more likely to reject it than to embrace it. Clarity around what Christian nationalism *is* and the impact that it has on our and our neighbors' freedoms is an important first step to dismantling the ideology and its threat to democracy.

Our democracy is made stronger by the participation of houses of worship in our public life. And our houses of worship are freer when candidates and parties don't use them for partisan political purposes. Working to end Christian nationalism does not mean working to end Christian expression in the public square. The antidote to this scourge is not for Christians to simply shut up about our faith. But authentic, effective work to end Christian nationalism means discerning carefully and thoughtfully *how* we represent our faith and its claims in ways that don't require that our faith receive special or preferential treatment.

Many people are compelled by their faith to advocate for their neighbors on any number of public policy matters. The question is not whether our faith can compel us to work appropriately in the public square; it can. The question is how to ensure our witness both represents our own faith and respects the faiths of others. As Christians engaging in the public square, we must remember to ground our advocacy in the teachings of Jesus and specifically his teaching to remember that we owe different allegiances to God and to Caesar (see Matthew 22:15–22). Our allegiance to God is always higher and deeper than our loyalty to earthly powers, so our public advocacy should not run afoul of our religious values and obligations.

* * *

IN EVERY ERA WHEN THIS IDEOLOGY RECURS, FOLLOWERS OF JESUS MUST MAKE A CHOICE.

As Christians against Christian nationalism, we have a firm word in Paul's letter to the Galatians (5:13–14): "You were called to freedom, kindred; only don't let this freedom be an opportunity to indulge your selfish impulses but serve each other through love. All the law has been fulfilled in a single statement: *Love your neighbor as yourself.*"

In every era when this ideology recurs, followers of Jesus must make a choice. In words of Rev. Jay Augustine, senior pastor of St. Joseph AME Church in Durham, N.C.: "Which Jesus do you serve? Which Jesus do you believe in?"

Amanda Tyler is an attorney, executive director of Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, and lead organizer for Christians Against Christian Nationalism. Adapted from *How To End Christian Nationalism* copyright © 2024 Amanda Tyler. Used with permission from Broadleaf Books.

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SOJOURNERS

THE HUNGRY SPIRIT

BY ROSE MARIE BERGER

THE FAITH TO BRING DOWN NAMIBIA'S SODOMY LAWS



With his 78-year-old mother in court watching and praying, Friedel Dausab calmly waited for the judges' decision. Would Namibia's post-colonial Constitution uphold human dignity for gay men, or would it cling to apartheid-era Calvinist laws that criminalized same-sex conduct?

Dausab, a born-again Christian, was raised in a deeply religious family. His faith undergirds his 25 years of service and advocacy for those living with HIV/AIDS. His work culminated most recently in Namibia's landmark legal decision in June to decriminalize gay sex. Dausab was the primary litigant.

I spoke with Dausab to learn more. His testimony of faith holds strands of God's work in history.

Dausab was born in the early 1970s on a farm in a region governed by apartheid South Africa. His earliest memory of Jesus was from a book of Bible stories for children that his mom, Magdalena, read to him in Afrikaans. In 1990 his country gained independence, founding a free Namibia. As a teenager, he came out as "a gay boy" to his mom, a missionary for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Namibia. Then, in his mid-20s, he gave her terrible news: He was HIV-positive.

At the time, HIV was the leading cause of death in Namibia. Dausab's diagnosis propelled him to respond to the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

"Over time," Dausab said, "I realized we were making good progress, but I was not seeing the most marginalized people, people like me, getting equitable service."

Before a legal challenge to the colonial discriminatory laws could be raised, the new government had to admit that gay Namibians existed. Even with Dausab sitting at the table, officials said, "We don't have them. What are you talking about?" He collaborated on a three-country study to provide the first data on the prevalence of gay men in his region.

He learned how acutely the sodomy laws impacted the HIV epidemic and the lives of individual men. They were deeply lonely, lacked language to describe their sickness, and were rejected by their families and church.

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Often, gay men were pressured into "pretend marriages," which increased disease transmission. "I realized that these laws had to go," Dausab told me. "All of a sudden we were dealing with a different mission."

I asked Dausab what it was like in the courtroom when the final verdict was read after more than three years in legal proceedings. "I couldn't believe my ears. There were serious security measures that day. Both my mom and I had a bodyguard. But also, the High Court judge was speaking *so* softly. Then I realized I was hearing the words 'unconstitutional and invalid.' That's when I knew it was done; that we had won. The law would no longer be used as a noose around the necks of gay men."

Dausab's journey is a response to Christ's call. He first met Jesus in those childhood Bible bedtime stories. "I didn't meet someone who was 'spiritual' or a 'church leader.' Instead, I met a human rights fighter. I met one who looked after the marginalized. ... who was able to talk to sex workers, to those accused of adultery. He was able to stand as a protective force between them and a society and system that would have them killed," Dausab said.

"Seeing my work as mission, as not just coming from me, makes it easier," Dausab told me. "When I get to the difficult parts of any given job, I go back to the Person who gave me the mission in the first place. I know that most of my fight will be on my knees." ⊗

Rose Marie Berger is senior editor of *Sojourners* magazine.

Friedel Dasaub in front of the Namibian LGBTQ flag. / Photograph by Opas Onucheyo

FROM THE DUST BY LIUAN HUSKA

LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR. GO TO A CITY COUNCIL MEETING.



The three short rows of folding chairs for the public were not full, but this was the highest attendance I had seen at a city council meeting. I was curious how the mayor and council members would respond this time. Community members had showed up to support a couple fighting what they felt was an unfair $20,000 building code violation fine.

After some preamble, the floor opened for public comment. A handful of residents of the small midwestern city where I live came to the podium for their allotted three minutes. "We've lost the adult in the room," one woman said. "I implore the council to consider the human aspects," a man said. He asked if the building board of appeals would be seated to review this case.

The mayor blinked, expression unchanged, "We can't comment, and your time is up."

The rest of the meeting flew by. Each agenda item was raised with no discussion and pushed through with nearly unanimous votes. The entire meeting was over in 17 minutes.

Later, I met with some of the residents who showed up that day. They are concerned about an opaque and unresponsive municipal government that doesn't have residents' best interests in mind. But changing the status quo is tedious, to say the least. Who will attend hours of city council and committee meetings and leaf through pages of disbursement reports? Who will track down if that new contractor is the mayor's cousin? More importantly, who will hold elected officials accountable? Who will challenge public servants for their seats when they aren't truly serving the public?

* * *

WHEN THE COMMUNITY IS UNINFORMED, IT'S EASY FOR LOCAL OFFICIALS TO ABUSE THEIR POWER.

In one of our last municipal elections, one alderman won with 49 votes. Only seven percent of the registered voters in her ward turned out.

A recent study from Portland State University found that local election turnout in 10 of America's 30 largest cities was less than 15 percent. The median voter age was 57. Given the dismal turnout rates and overrepresentation of older, white voters, however, a small, committed group of people encouraging their neighbors to participate can dramatically shift the face of local government.

Local civic engagement is unsexy and often boring. Media outlets tend to skip over local stories, creating news deserts where people hear little about what's going on in their neighborhoods, apart from unreliable social media posts. When the community is uninformed, it's easy for local officials to abuse their power.

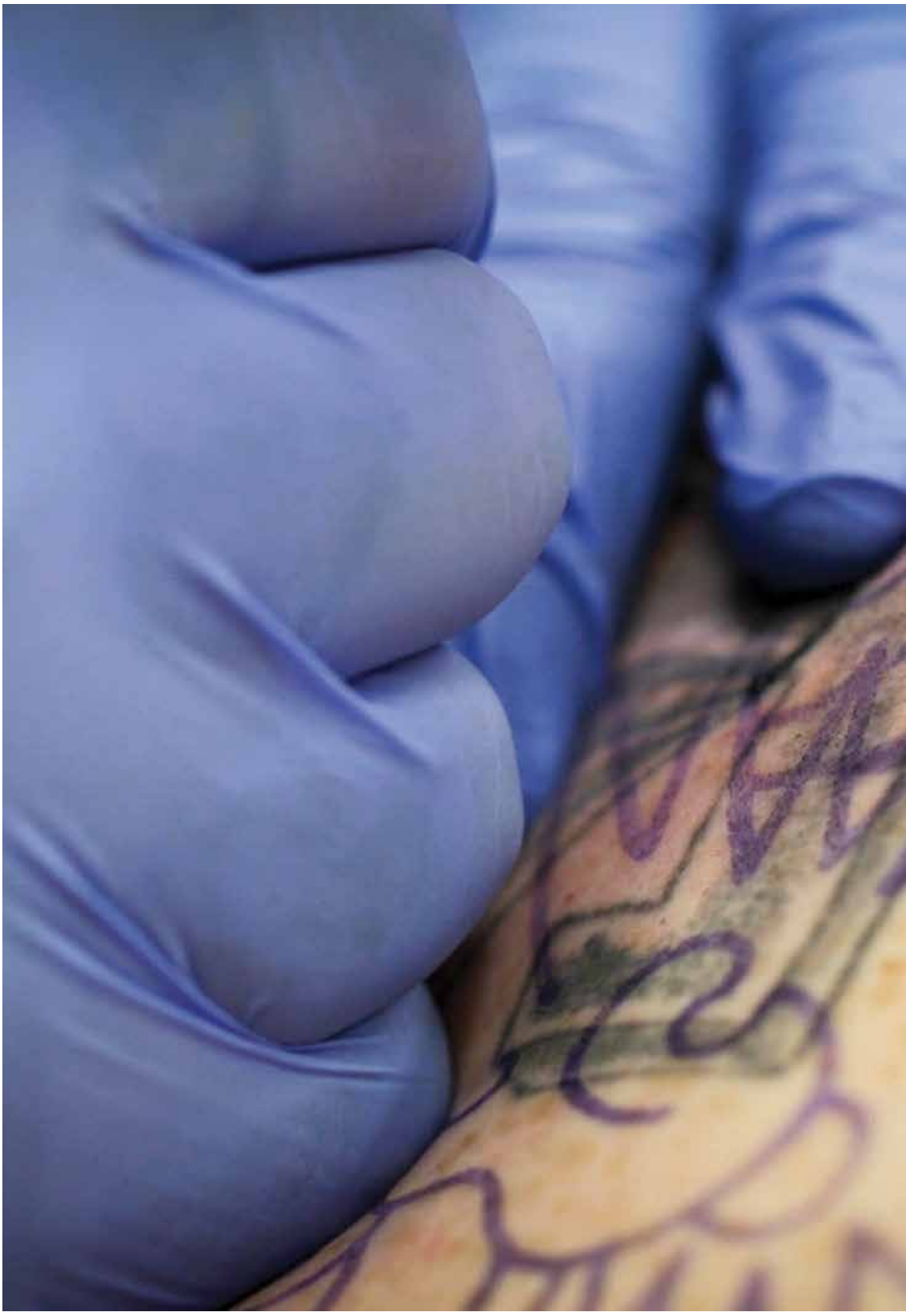
When I consider Jesus' call to love my neighbors, showing up at city council and committee meetings isn't top on my list. But the deliberations that happen in these spaces matter significantly for the daily lives of my neighbors and me, from how much our water costs to which companies get to do business in our backyards. Uniting with neighbors on these granular details can bridge the polarizing ideological divides so prevalent in national politics. In our times of fraying social trust, local civic action is one powerful way we can know and love our neighbors. ⊗

Liuan Huska is a freelance journalist and author of *Hurting Yet Whole: Reconciling Body and Spirit in Chronic Pain and Illness.*

MINIWIDE / iStock

EYEWITNESS

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"THERE'S STILL A LOT OF HEALING TO BE DONE."

Billy White draws a new design to cover a swastika tattoo on a client at Red Rose Tattoo in Zanesville, Ohio. White was featured in the 2018 short film *Beneath the Ink.*/ Cy Dodson



BEYOND HATE

The driver [who killed a counter-demonstrator] at the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville was from Ohio. I kept thinking "This is the picture people are going to have of people from my area." I offered to do 10 racist [tattoo] cover-ups for free. We had a large outpouring, and we haven't stopped. We've done hundreds in the past six years.

All kinds of people have approached us: reformed prison inmates, Aryan Brotherhood—dudes and women alike—who got prison racial gang tattoos, almost as a means of survival, and now they're out; ex-Klan members, ex-white nationalists, and militia party members; people with human trafficking tattoos [or] self-harm scars.

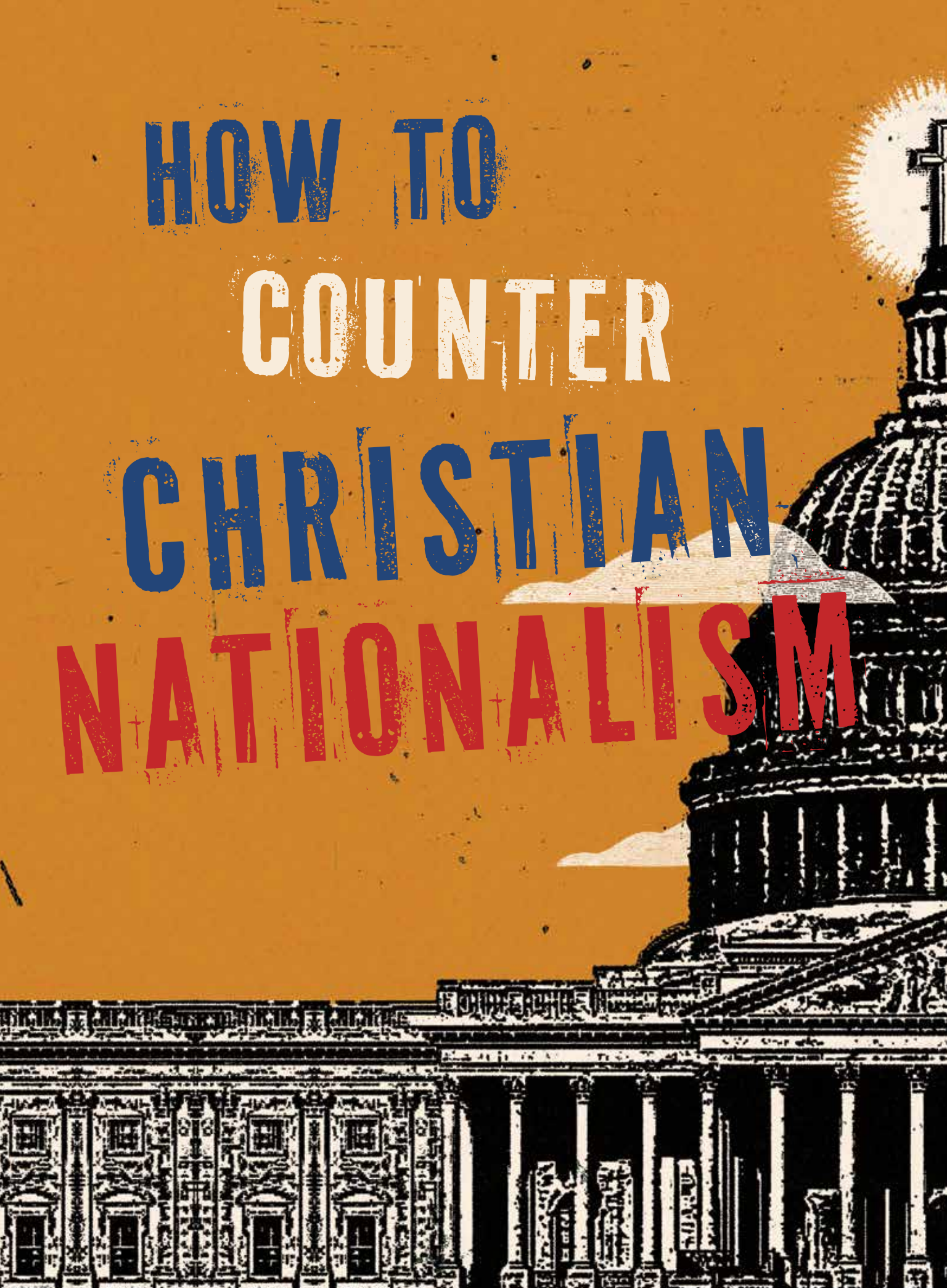
I'm not here to judge them, and I'm not the end of the journey. Human growth isn't linear. When you see a grown man who was once filled with hate, self-hatred, depression, and anxiety look in the mirror and cry, and part of that is now gone—and you were in the process—it's awesome. It's better than anything.

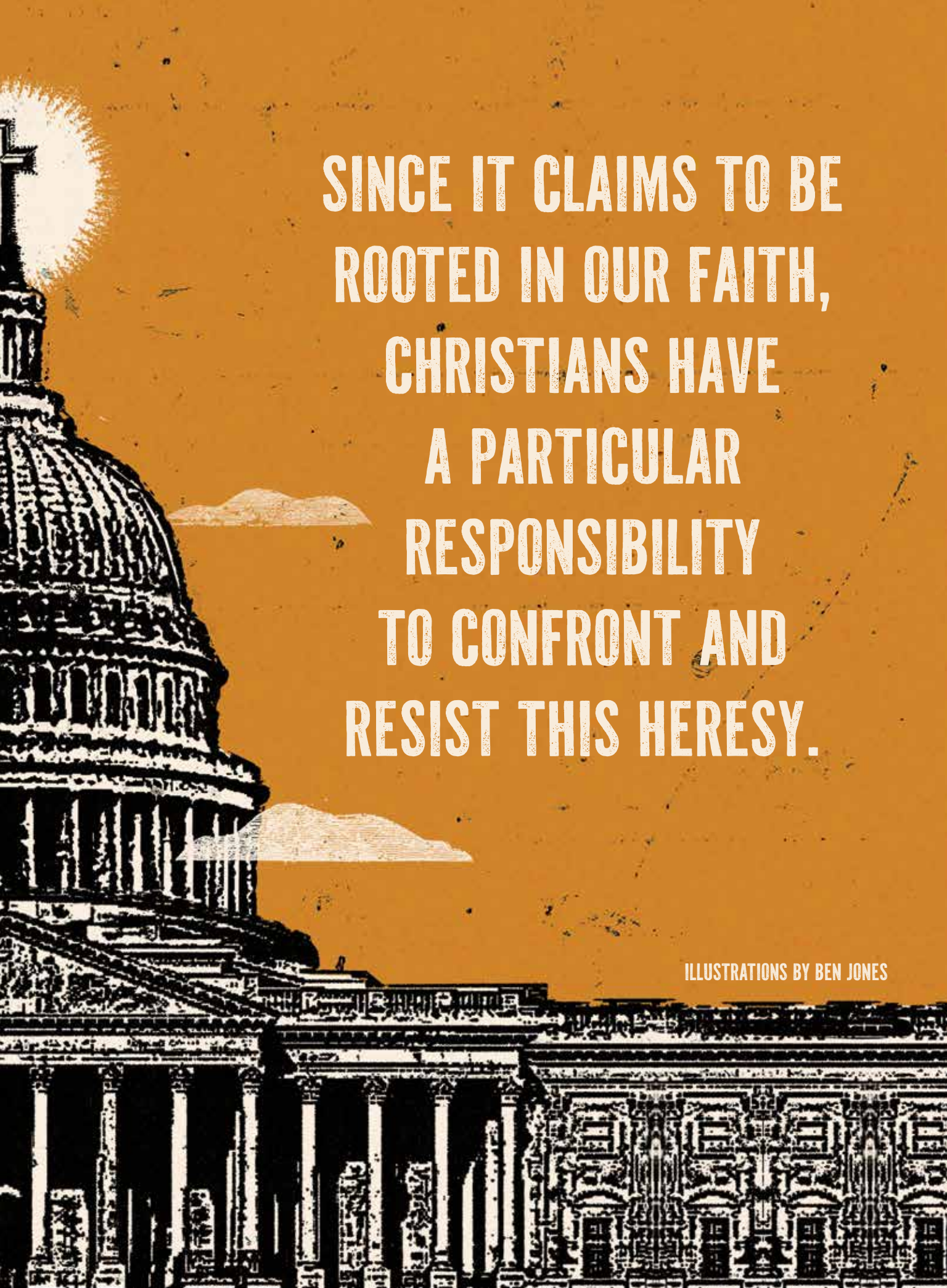
We're finding people that have gotten [their first racist tattoos] since we started our project. That hurts a little more for some reason. Sometimes you don't have to look to Washington, D.C., and everything that's going on there. Start small, in your circle, with the people you care about, and do the hard work and hard conversations ... do it from a place of love.

Our clients still deal with a lot of battles. It's not as simple as getting a cover-up and things magically get better. There's still a lot of healing to be done. [Many] don't have access to mental health or drug or alcohol counseling. For me and our shop, it's important for people to know consistently that we're here. They're loved. We don't expect any person to be perfect.

Billy White is the owner of Red Rose Tattoo in Zanesville, Ohio. He spoke with *Sojourners* associate editor Josina Guess.

HOW TO COUNTER CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM





ILLUSTRATIONS BY BEN JONES



WEAPONIZED CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM SEEKS A "CHRISTIAN" GOVERNMENT THAT WOULD ERODE CIVIL RIGHTS AND UNDERCUT ELECTION INTEGRITY AND DEMOCRATIC PRINCIPLES. IT ENDORSES THE USE OF VIOLENCE TO OBTAIN OR MAINTAIN POWER; EMBRACES WHITE SUPREMACY; AND DISTORTS CHRISTIAN LANGUAGE, SYMBOLS, AND IDENTITY INTO TOOLS FOR POLITICAL MANIPULATION AND GAIN.

AT THE SAME TIME, BELIEFS ABOUT "GOD AND COUNTRY" EXIST ON A WIDE SPECTRUM. WHITE CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM IS SOMETIMES SUPPORTED BY PEOPLE WHO ARE NOT WHITE. AND STIFLING ALL PARTICIPATION BY PEOPLE OF FAITH IN PUBLIC LIFE IS NOT A SUITABLE ALTERNATIVE TO NATIONALISM.

IN OTHER WORDS: IT'S COMPLICATED. YOU'RE NOT ALONE IF YOU ARE CONFUSED, CONCERNED, OR DISMAYED BY THESE TOPICS. BUT HOPEFUL ACTION IS POSSIBLE. THE FOLLOWING SHORT ESSAYS BY SCHOLARS, PASTORS, AND ACTIVISTS OFFER INSIGHTS ON CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM AND HOW TO DISMANTLE IT. FOR A LIST OF ADDITIONAL RESOURCES AND EFFECTIVE ACTIONS FOR CHRISTIANS TO SUPPORT DEMOCRACY, GO TO SOJO.NET/STEPS-TO-DEMOCRACY.

—THE EDITORS

PRACTICING A PROPHETIC FAITH

BY WILLIAM J. BARBER II

If faith were not powerful, people in power would not invest so much to manipulate it for their own interests. When we oppose Christian nationalism, we must begin with a recognition of the power of faith.

Faith has the power to bring us together and build up a democracy where everyone can thrive. Every movement toward a more perfect union in our nation's past has been powered and sustained by deep faith traditions. We need to learn from the faith of Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, and William Lloyd Garrison; Martin Luther King Jr., Dorothy Day, and Ella Baker. This rich theological heritage helps us guard against the forces that distort Christianity to justify extremism. But it also prepares us to practice prophetic faith in our own lives and ministries.

"Woe unto you who legislate evil and rob the poor of their right," the prophet Isaiah declares. In his first sermon, recorded in Luke 4, Jesus takes up Isaiah's scroll to proclaim "good news to the poor." Any alternative to the religious nationalism that calls itself "Christian" must embody this prophetic proclamation for the 135 million Americans who are poor or low-income today. As the divide between the super-rich and the poor has grown wider in the U.S. over the past half century, poor communities have been offered divisive culture wars and the false hope of an individualistic prosperity gospel.

In a time of extreme inequality, Ezekiel says God looked for someone to stand in the gap but found none. Several chapters later, though, God sends Ezekiel to prophesy to a valley of dry bones. There Ezekiel witnesses the power the rejected have when they come together and rise up as a nonviolent army.

FAITH HAS THE POWER TO BUILD UP A DEMOCRACY WHERE EVERYONE CAN THRIVE.

Poor people in the United States today are the largest swing vote in national elections. If they unite around an agenda, they have the power to reconstruct American democracy. God has seen fit to ordain those who have been rejected in this world to lead the revival of love, justice, and mercy that we so desperately need. We embody an alternative to religious nationalism when we join God in this work.

William J. Barber II, president of Repairers of the Breach and founding director of the Yale Center for Public Theology and Public Policy, is the author of *White Poverty: How Exposing Myths about Race and Class Can Reconstruct American Democracy.*



THE OPPOSITE OF THE GOSPEL

BY JENNIFER GARCIA BASHAW

Adherents to Christian nationalism believe they follow Christian principles. In reality, Christian nationalism is anti-Christian, upending biblical principles.

Christian nationalism enacts an insidious form of idolatry. The first commandment of the covenant that Yahweh makes with Israel is "you shall have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:3). There are countless stories about the disastrous consequences of worshiping anything other than Israel's God. The biblical witness implores the people of God to not prioritize anything over the worship of their God. Christian nationalism, in practice, does just the opposite.

More than that, the principles that Christian nationalism prioritizes over the worship of God—white supremacy, authoritarianism, the pursuit of power and dominance, and the violence of militarism—directly oppose the teachings and ministry of Jesus.

In his life, Jesus protected the marginalized and vulnerable (women, the poor, the infirmed, the outcast) while pushing against political and religious powers that perpetuated systems of dominance and abuse. In his death, Jesus submitted to those forces of empire to stand in solidarity with those who suffered under their rule. His resurrection solidified the truth of his teaching, that God's power and kin-dom is a life-giving, peace-bringing reign that turns empire on its head. Together, Jesus' life, death, and resurrection model for Christians how we should live, that we must *oppose* the death-dealing powers that cause suffering in the world.

"Christian" nationalism, in contrast, *aligns with* those powers and results not in the defense of the most vulnerable people, but in their dehumanization. Nothing could be further from the teachings of the Bible and Jesus' ministry.

Jennifer Garcia Bashaw is associate professor of New Testament and Christian ministry at Campbell University. She is the author of *Scapegoats: The Gospel through the Eyes of Victims* and *John for Normal People.*

NATIONALIST DELUSIONS

BY JAMES SPENCER

In ***Notes on Nationalism,*** George Orwell wrote: "Nationalism is power hunger tempered by self-deception." Nationalism is a form of ideological capture similar to other "isms" that sacrifice reality for simplicity and a false sense of control. Christian nationalism is one species of nationalism. As such, it pursues power tempered by delusions.

Christian nationalists seek the power to govern the United States on their own terms. Believing that America has drifted from its Christian origins and values, Christian nationalists believe they must guide the nation back to the right course. Guided by a selection of biblical maxims and Christian values, Christian nationalists believe they can ensure a strong nation for future generations. Seeking the power to govern becomes altruistic.

Christian nationalism's delusions inform its interest in power, implying that a certain standard of morality will guarantee America's future. There is little biblical reason to think that a minimal standard of morality will sustain our nation. The biblical text suggests that God limits the duration of nations (Acts 17:26) and will only allow a certain amount of "iniquity" (Genesis 15:16).

Second, it implies that ongoing legislation and enforcement will keep human sin in check. As I wrote in *Serpents and Doves,* "If Israel could not overcome human sin despite its unique, God-given advantages, why is it that we think a Christianized version of the United States can?" Law and order are not trivial, but they are limited. Christian nationalism overestimates the state's potential.

"CHRISTIAN" NATIONALISM ALIGNS WITH DEATH-DEALING POWERS.

There are other Christian nationalist delusions, but it seems important to end with a positive theological account of Christian politics. Our call is to follow Christ even if the world never changes. Christians may engage politically so long as doing so does not diminish our capacity to point to and glorify the Triune God. To do so, we remember that Christians are not responsible for fixing the world, but for living faithfully in a world so broken only God can fix it. Christians do not pursue political power but patience as we wait for God to make all things new (Revelation 21:5).

James Spencer, author of *Serpents and Doves: Christians, Politics, and the Art of Bearing Witness* and *Christian Resistance: Learning to Defy the World and Follow Christ,* is president of the D.L. Moody Center and Useful to God ministries.

ANTITHETICAL TO LOVE

BY AMAR D. PETERMAN

Instead of Christian nationalism, I want people to love their neighbors.

Christian nationalism is, at its core, a pursuit of control—of people, of land, of resources, of ideas, of speech—amid a perceived moment of chaos. Rather than seeing control as something we wield only in service to a greater good, Christian nationalists enjoy control for its own sake. It is, as St. Augustine describes, like an exiled community journeying home who, along the way, become so enthralled with the ships and carts transporting them that they forget why they embarked on this homebound journey in the first place. Christians who are infatuated with control will always lose sight of what God calls us to enjoy: God and neighbor.

If Jesus' life and ministry teach us anything, it is that this control is not only antithetical to love, but it also actively works *against* love. The determinative control that Christian nationalists seek to wield is the very control that God gives up. God does not force our hand but instead beckons us to love and enjoy God because of God's good and loving action toward us. God forfeits control by entering the chaotic waves and ripples of our contingency and creaturehood and making Godself known to us in Jesus Christ.

By returning control to its rightful place as something we *use* rather than *enjoy,* we are released to the radical, loving possibilities of moving in and through our world recognizing that Jesus is Lord, and we are not. Truly, the possibilities of goodness, flourishing, community, reconciliation, and transformation are not brought about by domination. They are made possible by the divine love of God flowing in and through us as we love a God who has commanded that we love our neighbors.

Amar D. Peterman is an Indian American scholar working at the intersection of faith and public life. He is writing a book on seeking the common good, to be published by Eerdmans.

YOU ARE NOT ALONE

BY MATTHEW HILDRETH

Across the country, thousands of rural Americans are working to slow the spread of Christian nationalism in our communities, and we are facing overwhelming odds.

Nationally, about 3 in 10 Americans sympathize with Christian nationalism. In rural states such as North Dakota, Mississippi, Alabama, and West Virginia, that number climbs to nearly 5 in 10.

Among my faith community (white evangelical Protestants), the numbers are especially alarming. Thirty-one percent of us support the statement: "Because things have gotten so far off track, true American patriots may have to resort to violence in order to save our country."

The vocal and visible presence of Christian nationalism in our communities can be overwhelming. Those of us in small towns and rural communities who disagree with Christian nationalist ideas often feel isolated, alone, and afraid. It can be scary to be the only person in your church or community who supports democratic values. But the fact is, you're not alone. Millions of pro-democratic voters live in small towns and rural communities. We're just in hiding.

MILLIONS OF PRO-DEMOCRACY VOTERS LIVE IN SMALL TOWNS AND RURAL COMMUNITIES.

That's why leaders in our rural network at RuralOrganizing.org are distributing thousands of yard signs that say, "We support choice, freedom, and democracy." Our research shows that these signs lead to multiple conversations with friends, families, and neighbors about the importance of supporting our democratic institutions.

Putting up a yard sign is a small step, but it's critical. We can't address Christian nationalism on our own. It takes an entire community; we can't build it in the dark. We must show our allies in the shadows that they are not alone. And if we're going to address the Christian nationalist ascendancy in rural America, it's easier if we all jump in together.

Matthew Hildreth is executive director of Rural Organizing.



CHRISTIANS WHO ARE INFATUATED WITH CONTROL WILL ALWAYS LOSE SIGHT OF WHAT GOD CALLS US TO ENJOY: GOD AND NEIGHBOR.

A CITIZEN OF HEAVEN FIRST

BY DIANA OESTREICH

In the middle of the night in Iraq, I woke up to my sergeant calling for a medic. I rolled out of bed, grabbing my gun and medic bag. While I was sitting in the tent clinic waiting for my patient to be seen, a soldier leaned over and in a conspiratorial whisper said, "I'm not a conscientious objector, but I love Jesus and there's no way I would take away another person's chance at knowing God for eternity. I'm a truck driver, and it's dangerous out here. I have a wife and kids back home too. But I refuse to load bullets in my weapon."

His words stung. What am I willing to give my life for? What am I willing to take a life for? My unflinching answer to both of those questions had always been "America."

Waging war in Iraq forced me to confront that I was trying to serve two masters: Christian nationalism and Christ. Because Jesus requires us to lay down the sword while Christian nationalism calls us to pick it up. Christ commands us to love our enemies while Christian nationalism requires us to conquer them. Christian nationalism divides us from Jesus.

That night I went back to my tent and unloaded the bullets from my gun. With each emptied bullet, I found freedom to give my allegiance to Jesus first and my country second. Obeying Jesus' command to love my enemies instead of killing them is how I became a citizen of heaven first.

We can't build a Christian nation marked by God's mercy, forgiveness, and self-sacrificial love using the tools of death, destruction, and deception.

Waging war cost me everything, but finding my freedom from Christian nationalism is what saved my life on the battlefield of Iraq and will change your life too.

Diana Oestreich is author of *Waging Peace: One Soldier's Story of Putting Love First.*



IT'S TIME TO CHOOSE

BY CARLOS A. RODRÍGUEZ

Christian Nationalism is an oxymoron. I know, because I have been a Christian and a nationalist. And I could not do both at the same time.

To be a Christian (aka a Christ follower) means following a leader who never led an army, who never used a weapon, who opened the table to outsiders, and who told us to welcome the stranger (as a way of welcoming Jesus).

To be a nationalist means that you put the nation above all. It is a type of worship of the history and race of one people over others. It's a faith statement that says, "We are superior AND WE MUST BE PROTECTED."

To be a proper Christian nationalist you must be bad at Christianity and bad at caring for your country.

It's time to choose.

When I pastored a church in North Carolina, I tried to start a Spanish-speaking service and declared our space a sanctuary. You know, so that undocumented migrants, who speak Spanish, could come worship Jesus without fear of being chased by ICE. But apparently "protecting" the nation against undocumented mothers, fathers, and children was more important than following Jesus.

Jesus was clear: Welcome the stranger.

Nationalism is clear: Reject the stranger, war with the stranger, destroy the stranger.

Christian nationalism is not a religion or a form of Christianity. It's a cultural framework that promotes the fusion of Christianity with American civic life—which is impossible when you're trying to follow Jesus into the margins.

Christian nationalism: Our country is blessed. It's manifest destiny. Our ways are superior. Our Constitution is divine. God chooses the U.S.

Christ: Love thy neighbor. Serve others. Welcome the stranger. Care for the poor and the sick. Be a peacemaker. For God so loved the world.

Carlos A. Rodríguez is an author and founder of The Happy Givers, a nonprofit addressing food insecurity and other needs in Puerto Rico.

I DON'T KNOW IF WE'LL SEE THE END TO THIS IN OUR LIFETIME, BUT. OUR FUTURE IS WORTH THE FIGHT.

CHANGE IS POSSIBLE

BY LISA JACOB, AS TOLD TO *SOJOURNERS*

I was in pastoral ministry for the past 13 years. I saw the toxicity of this Christian nationalist ideology and the way that it was captivating minds and hearts. To me it is a deep distortion of the gospel. As a pastor I felt a great responsibility to develop people and help them understand the ways of Jesus and how that is counter to this ideology.

When we think about addressing Christian nationalism, there are a few approaches. One is trying to develop awareness. Only a small percentage of the population are true champions of Christian nationalism, but many people are adherents or accommodators of some Christian nationalist beliefs. You address awareness through conversations and classes, trying to help change minds and hearts, most likely of those in the accommodator group.

One resource, for people who have no idea about Christian nationalism, is *The Flag and the Cross: White Christian Nationalism and the Threat to American Democracy,* by Philip S. Gorski and Samuel L. Perry. Another resource for conversations is Pamela Cooper-White's book *The Psychology of Christian Nationalism: Why People Are Drawn In and How to Talk Across the Divide.* She writes about three different thresholds: green light conversations, yellow light conversations, and red light conversations. We need to nuance conversations with people depending on where they are in their adoption of this ideology. She gives tools to think through that.

A second way to counter Christian nationalism is addressing the policies it impacts. Our coalition in North Texas has taken this route. We've focused on Tarrant County, where Fort Worth is, and Dallas County.

Through lots of conversations, we've discerned three focus areas. One is education—fighting for public schools and public-school teachers, specifically countering book bans and vouchers. The second area is immigration, as Christian nationalism influences the anti-immigrant narrative. The third area is church engagement. How do we help churches interrogate their biases around policies and practices that uplift Christian nationalism? We then find a new way forward, helping churches discern a theological framework for political and civic engagement in contrast to Christian nationalism.

There's so much that we can do to address Christian nationalism. But I often feel we are captivated by hopelessness. Change is possible. If we're not grounded in our hope of what could be—and what we want to see our world be—then we will be overwhelmed by the waves of issues and policy. I don't know if we'll see the end to this in our lifetime, but our future is worth the fight. ⊗

Lisa Jacob is the North Texas organizer for Christians Against Christian Nationalism, a project of the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty.



PENTECOST AND THE LURE OF POWER

LESSONS FROM ACTS ON BEING A SERVANT CHURCH.

BY SOONG-CHAN RAH

ILLUSTRATION BY ARŪNAS KAČINSKAS

Throughout the history of North American Christianity, the church has vacillated in its view of the intersection of evangelism and social justice. For a significant portion of that history, the church has been a moral voice on behalf of the "least of these" and advocated for justice in the public realm. Many Catholics and other Christians have not wavered in this work.

Since early in the 20th century, however, U.S. evangelical Christians in particular have focused primarily on personal evangelism and separated it from the justice witness of the church in public life. One of the negative consequences of the divorce of evangelism from justice has been the inability of evangelicals to engage politics in a biblical manner. Because evangelicals have seen social justice as a "secular" activity, our understanding of how justice works in the public square has been shaped more by the secular political imagination than by a biblical political imagination.

In the absence of a political imagination rooted in Jesus' gospel of sacrificial love and the prophetic tradition, dysfunctional expressions such as Christian nationalism, conflating faith with a specific party, and extreme polarization have emerged as the de facto position of much of the church in the political realm. The public sphere is captive to divisive and contentious rhetoric and characterized by a quest for power, and the desire to hold and wield that power over and against one's political opponent. The goal of many Christians in U.S. politics has deteriorated into aquiring power rather than serving the common good.

Much of U.S. evangelicalism has seemingly fallen into this trap—in contrast to the historical call of the church to be an advocate for the voiceless and powerless. How would engagement in the public realm change if the political imagination of evangelicals were to shift from this grab for power toward the Jesus' teaching to be servants of all? How can scripture and biblical examples offer insight in this fraught political season?

A return to the biblical text can help us better understand the foundations of the church and, therefore, the full role of the church in the public arena. Our calling as the church is not only to save individual lives from a "wrecked vessel" but also to honor the *imago dei* in every individual and offer hope by caring for the very least of these—by being salt and light in the world.



HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF PENTECOST

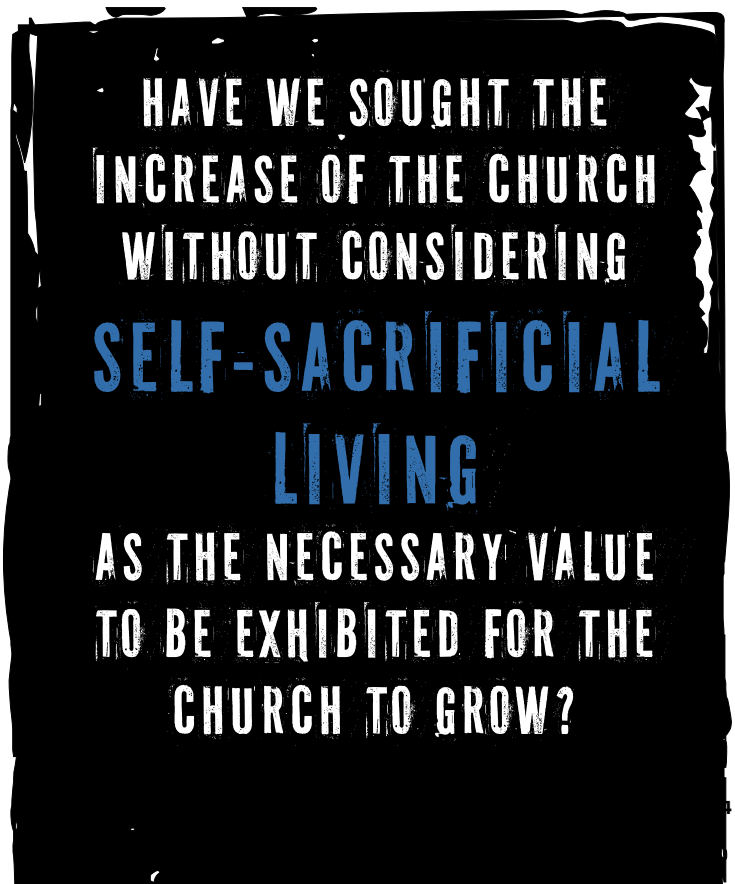
The Christian celebration of Pentecost, which is often understood as the birth of the church, directly connects to the Jewish holiday Shavuot (the Festival of Weeks celebrated 50 days after Passover). The gospel narrative emerges from the prophetic narrative of the Old Testament and the Jewish festival of Pentecost provides social and theological context for the birth of the New Testament church. The Jewish festival is a time of renewing and affirming the covenant between God and God's people, and so the birth of the new covenant community is in the context of the existing covenant with Yahweh's people in the Old Testament.

The church, therefore, continues the high calling of representing God's presence and witness in the world. As in the Old Testament covenant community, the church is an expression of God's shalom (the fullness and fulfilment of God's will and work in the world). The people of God in both the old and new covenant reveal the heart of God in acts of mercy, grace, and justice.

In Acts 2, during the Festival of Weeks, the Holy Spirit falls upon the disciples of Jesus and the church is born (Acts 2:1-4). The presence of the Holy Spirit inaugurates a new era in history, but it is marked by its connection to the older covenant. The Holy Spirit compels a fearful community struggling for their identity to embrace their identity as God's people upon whom the Spirit of God has fallen.

BRINGING THE GOSPEL TO LIFE

One of the external expressions of the church emboldened and empowered by the Holy Spirit is the apostle Peter preaching the good news to a large crowd. "Peter stood up with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd [offering an empowered proclamation of the gospel message]. ... When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart" (Acts 2:14, 37). Many in the crowd respond to Peter's preaching with repentance and baptism, and the church experiences its first growth spurt. "Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day" (Acts 2:41).



Most American interpretations of Acts 2 emphasize the powerful preaching and public proclamation of Peter's sermon (Acts 2:14-40), which is assumed to be the primary impetus for the growth of the church in Acts 2:41 and 47. In most English translations, Acts 2:41 ("Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day") is marked off as the culmination of Peter's sermon and not as part of the following section describing the community life of the church. This reflects assumptions about the importance of preaching and verbal proclamation to evangelism and church growth.

But I would assert that Acts 2:41 serves as a bridge between Peter's sermon and the life of the church as described in Acts 2:42-47. What if the growth of the church described in Acts 2:41 belongs structurally to the last section of Acts 2 rather than the first section? If we examine Acts 2:41-47 as one unit, a structure emerges for these verses that points to another explanation for the growth of the church. Acts 2:41 and 47 serve as framing verses for what occurs between Acts 2:42 and 46.

The structure of this passage, therefore, follows the chiastic structure so commonly found in Greek literature. In chiastic structures a series of ideas move toward a central statement and then repeat in reverse order. Acts 2:41-47 seems to develop in this manner:

A Numerical growth of the church (Acts 2:41)
  B Characteristics of church life (Acts 2:42-43)
  - Fellowship (teaching, breaking bread, prayer)
  - Outsiders are amazed
    C Self-sacrificial life of the church (Acts 2:44-45)
  B′ Characteristics of church life (Acts 2:46-47)
  - Fellowship (meeting in the temple, breaking bread, praise)
  - Outsiders are amazed
A′ Numerical growth of the church (Acts 2:47b)

In using the chiastic structure, Luke may be pointing to a different interpretation of the growth of the church in the first century. The center of this chiastic structure, Acts 2:44-45, depicts the self-sacrificial life of the church, in which the believers hold "all things in common" and "sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need." These center verses become the focus of how the outer statements, which describe the church adding to its number, come to pass. So, instead of seeing evangelism and church growth as the effect of Peter's verbal proclamation and *preaching* of the gospel, we could instead see evangelism and church growth as a product of how effectively the self-sacrificial life of the church *demonstrates* the gospel.

Have we overemphasized personalized, verbal proclamation while ignoring the public manifestation of the gospel through racial reconciliation, social service, social action, and justice? Have we sought the growth and increase of the church without considering self-sacrificial living as the necessary value to be exhibited for the church to grow?

God's call for justice is made evident throughout scripture. While specific expressions of evangelicalism have eschewed justice as a biblical call, the scriptures themselves testify to a God who calls the community toward a shalom that requires justice. The movement of God, therefore, is evident in the evangelistic efforts of the church that seeks the salvation of individual souls through the proclamation of the gospel, but also demonstrates God's justice in a world longing for the shalom of God's kingdom.

The birth of the church in Acts 2 reveals a community committed to proclaiming the gospel while also sharing the compassion, mercy, and justice of the gospel through the church's self-sacrificial example. At the founding of the church, justice as witness is demonstrated. Evangelism and justice go hand in hand.



A DIFFERENT POWER DYNAMIC

But there is an additional element of the Acts 2 Pentecost story that cannot be ignored. The value system of God's people in Acts 2 differs from the value system of the world in a clear and direct way. The church does *not* seek more power within their own community nor in the outside world. The same Holy Spirit that empowered the once-denying-of-Jesus apostle Peter to boldly, publicly proclaim the good news also empowers the people of the church to do something that may go against their very nature. Instead of seeking their own betterment or using the power of the purse to gain authority or control over others, God's people lay down their power (their material possessions and wealth) so that those who were without could be lifted. The true power of the Holy Spirit is to *yield* power and thus demonstrate the gospel in unexpected ways, such as by raising up the powerless and voiceless.

In the same way, could the 21st century evangelical church in the United States heed the call to *not* pursue its own agenda of power and greatness, but rather learn to be the servant of all? Could the church lay down the expressions of power (institutional, political, and material)—or at least stop seeking to grab more of it—for the voiceless to be more clearly heard? Could we defend the widows, the orphans, and the immigrants among us for the sake of the gospel?

In this contentious election season, U.S. evangelicals could provide the profound example of laying down power rather than seeking more of it. What if the evangelical vote demonstrated a concern for the interests of the very least of these (the refugee, the other, the poor, the outcast) rather than simply our own benefit? Our political engagement could be used *not* for our own material gain and for the sake of increased political power, but for the sake of the gospel, which is good news for the poor. Our desire to make the church great again could be infused with the sense of learning and seeking to be a servant of all.

Soong-Chan Rah, the Robert Boyd Munger professor of evangelism at Fuller Theological Seminary, is author of *The Next Evangelicalism: Freeing the Church from Western Cultural Captivity,* from which a portion of this essay was adapted.


HOLY BIBLE
HONDURAS



LATINO CHURCHES AND THE RISE OF RIGHT-WING POLITICS

IS "MIRACULOUS MERITOCRACY" DRIVING SOME BELIEVERS TOWARD A GOSPEL OF ENTITLEMENT?

BY TONY TIAN-REN LIN / ILLUSTRATIONS BY MARIANA OCEJO

All the Sunday School classes were gathered at a plaza in Buenos Aires. After months of preparation, we were there for the churchwide tournament. Participation was mandatory; the competition was public. Glory or shame for all to see. Our task was to recite by memory an arbitrary list created by the teachers—the Lord's Prayer, Psalm 23, names of all twelve apostles, the books of the New Testament and, for extra credit, the Old Testament ... in order. A church elder stood ready to score children in each category.

My arrogant 9-year-old self stepped up first. Everyone knew I was going to be a pastor. My parents had helped me. My sister and I had practiced. I had to know this stuff. The elder at the "Lord's Prayer station" nodded for me to begin.

"*Padre nuestro que estas ... .*" He began to shake his head. "*En los cielos, santificado sea tu nombre ... .*" He made a noise with his tongue; his face looked like he had sucked a lemon. "No" he commanded, waving his hands. "In Taiwanese!"

Tears burned down my cheeks. I should have known. It wasn't so much our faith on trial that day, but the degree of our "Taiwanese-ness." My Taiwanese Presbyterian Church was raising not just Christians, but Taiwanese nationalists. The language of the church had to be their version of "pure" Taiwanese. I knew it could never be Mandarin Chinese but Spanish was unacceptable too. As my moment of glory turned to shame, I ran into the park to cry alone.

THE POWER OF CULTURE

My Presbyterian church introduced me to Taiwan's version of Christian nationalism.

I was born in Taiwan 27 years after the Chinese Kuomintang (KMT) party seized the island of Taiwan after losing the mainland to the Chinese Communist Party. Between 1947 and 1987, the KMT established a one-party, authoritarian state that ruled with terror and violence. More than 140,000 Taiwanese citizens were incarcerated and tortured. Thousands more were assassinated—including my grandfather, who was a pastor and seminary professor. In 1981, my family fled Taiwan (a country under martial law) to Argentina (a country entangled in the "Dirty War").

The Taiwanese Presbyterian Church was always a hub for Taiwanese resistance against Chinese invasion. Forged under oppression, the exiled church I grew up in became the vehicle by which to raise nationalists who would fight for Taiwanese independence and resist the evils of mainland China—even from far-away Argentina. Thus, their version of Christian nationalism was born. Taiwanese superiority was implicit in all church activities and explicit in some. In the diaspora this nationalism was even more extreme. It went far beyond respecting our past or holding on to the language of our parents. This was about imposing a vision of God's justice that included a sovereign Taiwan independent from Chinese influence.

As I grew up and moved outside Taiwanese circles, I was exposed to other forms of Christianity that pushed me to question what I had been taught as a child. My family moved to the United States. Eventually I became a Presbyterian pastor. I even took a call at a Taiwanese Presbyterian Church to push back against the nationalism that lingered. I thought I could change them. I failed and left to pursue a doctorate in sociology to better understand the power of culture.

> WHITE CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM IS A RELIGIOUS FABRICATION THAT FORCES ADHERENCE TO AN IMAGINED IDENTITY.

My experience with Taiwanese Christian nationalism helped me recognize the white Christian nationalism I saw in the U.S. because both operate under the same logic. White Christian nationalism is a religious fabrication that forces adherence to an imagined identity. Its doctrines and practices are concerned with passing on the moral code that glorifies and normalizes the myth of the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant, middle-class, nuclear family. It serves as a religious vehicle for preserving fictitious cultures. It preaches good news for those *already* at the center of power, rather than to the marginalized who need it. Christian nationalism is an effective theodicy for self-made white victims: Where is God when bad things happen to white people? God is restoring a Christian nation in which whiteness will once again reign supreme.

Whether among the white evangelicals I worked with in Virginia or the Taiwanese Presbyterianism in which I was raised, Christian nationalism has one goal: Use God to bless human ambition for power. This is not new. From the "city upon a hill" to Manifest Destiny and beyond, Christian nationalism has always been part of American Christianity.

ARE WE 'ALL AMERICANS' NOW?

Recently, media has reported a rise in ethnic minorities who appear to support white Christian nationalism. If white supremacy is key to Christian nationalism in the United States, then why are some ethnic minorities aligning with it? Or are they?

In 2005, I began an in-depth national study of Latino Pentecostal congregations, focusing especially on the role of the prosperity gospel in Latino communities. In all my years researching, worshiping in, and even pastoring Latino congregations, I have not found Christian nationalism per se to be prevalent in these churches.

Yet data shows that Latino evangelicals voted for President Trump and opposed his impeachments more than Latinos of other religious orientations. A positive correlation between Trump support and church attendance was also found. Both patterns *seem* to indicate a religious push toward the right.

"Latinos" as a group, however, are extremely diverse. In fact, this nation's multiracial dream has always been our reality. Latinos are of every race and trace their roots through multiple continents. We present in the full spectrum of skin complexions. Even Asian Latinos (like me) are a growing demographic.

Seventy-two percent of all Latinos in the U.S. are fluent in English, with nearly a quarter identified as "*No Sabos*" (Latinos who can't speak Spanish). All our countries have a version of empanadas, and they all taste different. Every few years our countries of origin play against each other in Copa America, the soccer championship of the Americas, rekindling our pride in our ancestral lands, even as we are all Americans now.

We are multilingual, multiethnic, and multicultural in a nation that historically punishes difference and forces groups into social hierarchies. Yet our sheer number forced the U.S. Census to acknowledge that individuals can fit more than one classifica-



tion. So, the census bureau created a new classification for us: "Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin." This is our gift to America. This gift is also our antidote to ethno-nationalism.

Scholars have shown that white Christian nationalism is fueled by white racial victimhood. It unites around an ideal of whiteness and all the privilege it represents. What looks like a rise in Christian nationalism among some Latino, Black, and Asian Christians does not develop as it does among white evangelicals. Social scientists show that although Christian nationalism views both religious diversity and racial diversity as a threat, when it comes down to it, it's the racial dynamic that holds. The link between Christian nationalism and political *violence* is sharply conditioned by *white* identity, a perception of victimhood, and support for conspiracy theories.

I would argue that average Latino congregations are *not* following the path of white evangelical megachurches in political activism. Church attendance has long been associated with greater political activism, including voting. While Latinos have higher rates of church attendance than whites, they vote at a much lower rate. In fact, Latinos have the lowest voter registration and turnout of any ethnic group in the 2020 election. Nearly half of all Latinos who were registered to vote did not turn up at the polls. In 2022, only 58 percent of Latinos were registered to vote.

By the 2024 U.S. presidential election, Latinos could potentially be the largest non-white voting demographic, accounting for nearly 15 percent of all eligible voters. But historically, they won't vote as a bloc and only half will cast a ballot.

CHRISTIANITY IN DECLINE

Why the lack of political participation?

While some Latino churches have better attendance than the average church in America, nearly all Latino Protestant churches are facing financial decline and an aging population. Like all churches in the United States, including white evangelicals, Latino church attendance *overall* is dropping. Rapid population growth among Latinos has *not* translated into church growth. The share of Latinos who are Protestants has dropped to 21 percent from its peak of 26 percent just six years ago. Catholics now make up only 43 percent of all Latinos, down from 67 percent in 2010.

Population growth due to immigration has bolstered some Latino congregations. But, since the 2000s, Latinos born in the U.S.—not immigrants—are the main driver of Latino population growth. Nearly half of Latinos born in the U.S. since 1994 identify as "religiously unaffiliated." Conversely, only about 20 percent of Latinos ages 50 and older describe themselves as religiously unaffiliated (and 56 percent of these were born outside the U.S.).

Additionally, Latino churches have always played a significant role in supporting recent immigrants. But with declining numbers, aging congregations, and dwindling finances, when recent younger immigrants arrive, they may find limited support and little reason to stay. This may further the cycle of decline.

More consequentially, the percentage of Latinos in the U.S. who agree that religion is "very important in their lives" has dropped significantly. Between 2007 and 2023, the number of Latino Protestants who agree with that statement dropped from 65 percent to 56 percent. Among Latino Catholics during the same period, agreement dropped from 68 percent to 46 percent. Even Latino evangelicals' agreement dropped from 85 percent to 73 percent. This pattern is reflected in Christians of all races in America. Against this backdrop, many Latino faith leaders are juggling multiple jobs while struggling to sustain their congregations. They are busy attending to the immediate needs of their members and those in the local community. In general, they have little time to invest in the long game of political influence.

'MIRACULOUS MERITOCRACY'

Theologically, Latino Pentecostals in particular rarely engage in political activism because they believe in what I call "miraculous meritocracy."

The majority of Latino Pentecostals are committed to the idea of meritocracy (a prevailing doctrine in American Christianity far beyond Latinos). They believe that their hard work and determination will pay off. It is one of the reasons they and their parents immigrated. They believe in being the captain of their own souls. This is the central myth of the American Dream—if you work hard and follow the rules of the dominant (white) culture, you can succeed economically and socially.

Yet these communities are not naïve to the very real obstacles they face. Thus, they have miraculous meritocracy. They work hard, live moral lives, and stay relentlessly optimistic not because they will earn their reward but because God will perform a miracle that will grant them their wishes.

Under the doctrine of miraculous meri-

tocracy, hard work and sacrifice are critical. Like other Christians, they believe that God can heal them and help them financially. What is unique about this meritocracy model in some Latino churches is the explicit *entitlement* to those tangible economic and social rewards—you deserve this, and God wants you to have it. Any doubts or fears are signs of unfaithfulness that will sabotage one's blessing. It is a guaranteed transaction provided that the believers hold up their end of the bargain. Those faithful who work the hardest and make the greatest investments and sacrifices will be rewarded with a miracle—in the form of a payoff from God.

Miraculous meritocracy must be taught, especially to immigrants to the United States. It goes against the communitarian ethos that most arrive with and serves to assimilate them into the individualism of American consumer culture. With this worldview, working for a national social safety net or expecting government "handouts" may be interpreted as a sign of *un*faithfulness. One should not look to the government or other institutions to do the work one must faithfully do to earn God's blessings. God will deliver to the deserving.

WHAT LIVES WITHIN US

Christian nationalism is not a new concept in the United States. It is intertwined with America's greatest challenge: white supremacy, which has ruled our nation since its inception.

White supremacy is hegemonic, which means even those who are oppressed uphold the oppressive system as righteous. It's not just a temptation for white evangelicals or Anglo-Saxon Protestants, its allure reaches into all our communities. That is why so many immigrants are wholeheartedly committed to the various ideologies that hold up white supremacy, such as neoliberalism, meritocracy, moralism, and even the American Dream. In all its manifestations, these ideas sustain white supremacy to empower some and dehumanize all, even the oppressors. But the same white supremacy that forced many of us out of our homelands also created this nation we now call home. We are all victims and beneficiaries of white supremacy. Many of us carry white supremacy in our DNA. That is a messy truth to reckon with.

As Christians, can we try to recognize the evil within us even as it crushes us? If we can learn to acknowledge, accept, and disarm it, then possibly we can give birth to what author Junot Díaz calls "blasphemous solidarities"—the willingness to confront what we perceive as abhorrent



THE SAME WHITE SUPREMACY THAT FORCED MANY OF US OUT OF OUR HOMELANDS ALSO CREATED THIS NATION WE NOW CALL HOME.

in ourselves and others in order to elevate our shared and inherent human dignity.

"Our trying," writes Díaz, " ... must be complex and fearsome and, yes, impossibly compromised. To reckon with a past like slavery we must be willing ... to entertain blasphemous solidarities with the very thing that sought to destroy us and seeks to destroy us still." The promise of our gospel is that we will not be destroyed.

So let blasphemous solidarity be our divine call. Let the liberating power of the gospel of Jesus give us the courage to live out the diversity and contradictions we carry in our lives so that we may be empowered to transform principalities and powers that rule this world and dare to imagine a new way of living together. We, who gave this nation new categories of being, *we can do this.*

In that park in Buenos Aires, when I responded in the wrong language, I was shamed into hiding but also called into hope. Alone and crying, a group of children and adults came looking for me. *"Lo podemos hacer en Castellano!* We can compete in Spanish!" they shouted. It turned out most kids had memorized the responses in the only language they knew: Spanish. The church elders gave in.

Others might have set the rules, but together we can change them.

Tony Tian-Ren Lin is a Presbyterian pastor and cultural sociologist living in New York City. He is author of *Prosperity Gospel Latinos and Their American Dream.*

SALVATION MOUNTAIN, FLANKED BY MILITARY MIGHT AND ENVIRONMENTAL DESTRUCTION, COLORFULLY PROCLAIMS, 'GOD IS LOVE.'

By Cassidy Klein



We stood at the base of a sticky, bright mountain, a 50-foot-high altar of hay and clay and thousands of gallons of paint proclaiming "GOD IS LOVE" in chunky letters. We shaded our faces from the hazy-sizzling sky to see the white cross at the very top, blue stripes streaming down the sides, a parade of happy flowers at the base. "Say Jesus I'm a sinner please come upon my body and into my heart" is written into a giant cherry-red heart.

My friends and I were 19 years old and seeing Salvation Mountain, the folk-art stronghold, for the first time. We learned about Salvation Mountain the way most people do these days: through friends on Instagram. We drove three hours east from San Diego to Niland, a tiny census designated place in Southern California's Imperial Valley, a desert landscape of sagebrush, sand, and brassy wind. Salvation Mountain's artist, Leonard Knight, began building the mountain in 1984 and maintained it every day until his health began to fail in 2011. He died in 2014.

Art

The prayer in the big red heart was what Knight prayed on the day he experienced a born-again moment and heard God call him to build a mountain proclaiming universal love to the world. When we visited, he'd been dead for a few years, and the mountain was getting cracked and worn,

Salvation Mountain in Imperial County, Calif. / Attila Adam / iStock



the paint tearing up in chunks. Knight built other structures next to the mountain, including a shaded "forest" of what he called "car tire trees": stacks of tires for trunks and crisscrossed poles for branches, mixed with adobe and straw and painted bright colors. We quietly moved among them. "God is love" appeared again and again on the crevices and lumps, like a psalm. I felt it in my chest, that ache it takes to devote all of one's creativity and being to God.

Knight didn't ask permission to build his mountain on state-owned property, right next to concrete slabs that used to be a military training range. But that hasn't stopped it from becoming a destination for artists, students, pilgrims, and tourists. Earlier this year, Salvation Mountain was designated a historically significant property and historic resource site in Imperial County, which will protect it from development that could cause "adverse change." Since Knight's death 10 years ago, a team of volunteers has maintained the mountain. Locals and supporters wonder how long the mountain will last without its creator.

Imperial County is one of the poorest counties in California. To the west of Salvation Mountain is the Salton Sea, the largest inland lake in the state and 50 percent saltier than the Pacific Ocean. The Salton Sea has become toxic and salty due to pesticide and agricultural runoff and algae blooms that eat up oxygen, which have also killed mass amounts of fish and other wildlife. Local communities near the Salton Sea suffer health conditions like asthma and headaches due to chemical-laden dust.

A few years ago, lithium-rich brine was discovered underneath the Salton Sea. The silvery-white metal is used in electronics like cell phones and laptops. The Salton Sea lithium trove is estimated to be enough to supply all the U.S. demand. Because lithium is necessary for electric vehicle batteries, supporters and investors emphasize the environmental benefits of extracting it. But lithium mining requires an immense amount of water, and residents are concerned about the impact on their community. The process would draw from the Colorado River, the water source for irrigation in this agricultural region.

To the east of Salvation Mountain, the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps operate a 458,267-acre bombing range in the cobbly Chocolate Mountains. There, near Niland, squads simulate combat and Navy teams train for land warfare.

"It is not uncommon to hear planes and helicopters and practice artillery combats echoing off the mountain walls and desert floors as one sits at Salvation Mountain," wrote historian and theologian Sara M. Patterson in *Middle of Nowhere*. Her book, which explores Salvation Mountain, religion, and folk art, argues that the landscape—the Salton Sea and its environmental decay, the military industrial complex and governmental forms of control—influences Salvation Mountain's impact as a piece of art and as a religious statement.

This bombing range, intentionally built in a perceived "middle of nowhere," isn't meant to be seen—or heard—by the public. But Knight's Salvation Mountain draws thousands of visitors to the area every year.

"Everything is here," Knight said in 2007. "The mountain clay is here, the adobe is here, the desert is here, there's free rent in Slab City, so 24 years later I'm still here."

Knight never attended church—the mountain was his worship space and community. "God loves the whole world, everybody in the world," he would say. "Let's not get confused."

Patterson wrote that Knight felt Christians needed to be coaxed "back to what he believed true Christianity was—gratitude for God's love." Knight wanted the artwork's message **cont'd on page 43**

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I FELT IT IN MY CHEST, THAT ACHE IT TAKES TO DEVOTE ALL OF ONE'S CREATIVITY AND BEING TO GOD.

Leonard Knight created Salvation Mountain from 1984 to 2010 using adobe, straw, and paint to convey the message that "God Loves Everyone." Knight died in 2014. / Paul Harris / Getty Images



From *I Saw the TV Glow*

THE TOLL OF INACTION

By Curtis Yee

It's hard to understand what motivates Owen, in part because he is almost always alone. The lead in *I Saw the TV Glow* (played by Ian Foreman and later Justice Smith) is near-always inert, save for when it comes to his favorite television show: *The Pink Opaque*.

When the lonely seventh grader discovers that a disaffected girl two grades older than him, Maddy (Brigette Lundy-Paine), also stays up late to watch the monster of the week show, he sneaks out to watch it with her. It is one of the most radical acts he takes.

Set in an anonymous suburb in 1996, the two gather every Friday to watch the show, a *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Twin Peaks* composite about supernaturally empowered teens who defend their suburban county against the evil Mr. Melancholy. Together they fall into the show's immersive lore to escape their own hardships—an abusive stepfather, a chronically ill mother. As Maddy explains, the show "feels more real than real life."

That sentiment mirrors director Jane Schoenbrun's own lived experience as a trans person. In an interview with Bright Wall/Dark Room, they explain that the film was a way to reflect on media as a coping mechanism—a response to the "lack of a real life or a real identity." Growing up, Schoenbrun continues, "I could put all of my love into fiction, when it felt unsafe to do so in real life."

Schoenbrun's homage to fandom fixation channels Lynchian unease through a distinctly trans aesthetic. I say aesthetic because rather than depicting trans characters and their experiences, Schoenbrun animates the anxiety of disembodiment through the plot and setting. The director compiles for Owen an unreality to match their own: nights bathed in synthetic hues; suburban sets dressed ever-so-crooked. The culmination creates a melancholic unease for viewers, what critic Emily St. James dubs a "contact-high gender dysphoria."

The years slip away from Owen, the undertow of distortion that characterizes his world goes down easier, and the membrane between life and the show deteriorates. And while Maddy hankers to escape the rhythm of life's indecencies, Owen will need to decide whether he can change before it's too late.

I Saw the TV Glow explores the horror of a life of inaction, a denial of self that leads not to transformation but destruction. Schoenbrun's camera forefronts Owen's psychological isolation. Even during scenes with his co-stars, they rarely share the screen, each confined to their own separate frames. It is an atmosphere uniquely birthed from trans experience, but also one that anyone who has ever felt alone or discarded will recognize.

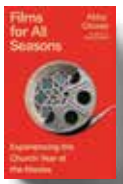
There is a cost to refusing the call to change. In this film, the rocks cry out, warning that it's never too late. ⊗

Curtis Yee is a reporter and critic living in Washington, D.C. He covers faith, society, and everything in between.

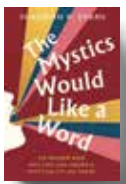
OUR MUSLIM NEIGHBORS

In an era defined by ideological silos, it's as important as ever to understand our neighbors. The podcast *Me & My Muslim Friends* invites listeners to do just that, with host Yasmin Bendaas leading thoughtful conversations about the broad spectrum of American Muslim experiences.
WUNC





Salvation and Cinema
In *Films for All Seasons,* critic and *Sojourners* columnist Abby Olcese demonstrates how engaging with movies can enrich one's experience of the church calendar. Olcese pairs movies with key liturgical moments (Easter and *The Iron Giant*, for instance) to reflect on questions that permeate pop culture and Christianity.
IVP



Old Friends
Shannon K. Evans' *The Mystics Would Like a Word* is a conversational guide to the lives of six female Christian mystics, including Teresa of Ávila and Margery Kempe. These women—complicated, resilient, fascinating—offer companionship and wisdom for contemporary challenges.
Convergent Books

RECLAIMING HISTORY

By Sarah James



Light & Air

In 2015, I visited two plantations in rural Louisiana to write a college paper on white supremacy. One, Whitney Plantation, centered the experiences of enslaved people by sharing "firsthand accounts" and including statues of and memorials to them. The other, Oak Alley Plantation, romanticized the Antebellum South. Filled with indignation, I could not fathom how tourists at Oak Alley drank mint juleps where brutality, violence, and terror once reigned. Clint Smith, author of *How the Word Is Passed,* studies sites of racialized violence in the U.S. to help form a more accurate American "public memory." We need Smith's poetic-sociological vision to help us tell the true, humanizing stories of our—often ugly—history.

During my visit, Oak Alley sold copies of *Little Black Sambo* by Scottish author-illustrator Helen Bannerman in its gift shop (the shop no longer sells this title). A racist children's book about a family that is widely understood to be Tamil, the 1899 children's book portrays dark-skinned Indian people through heavy "pickaninny" caricature. In the book *Racial Innocence* historian Robin Bernstein explains, "The pickaninny was an imagined, subhuman black juvenile who was typically depicted outdoors, merrily accepting (or even inviting) violence." The dangerous trope desensitizes us to violence against Black and brown children, evidenced throughout history from slavery to police brutality. My family is part Tamil, and I nearly choked when I saw this "artifact" of dehumanization dressed up as nostalgia.

* * *

TOURISTS AT OAK ALLEY DRANK MINT JULEPS WHERE BRUTALITY, VIOLENCE, AND TERROR ONCE REIGNED.

Smith writes, "[In Louisiana,] you are still more likely to hear stories of how the owners of the land 'treated their slaves well' than you are to hear of the experiences of actual enslaved people." Whitney stands in contrast, in Smith's words, as "a place asking the question: How do you tell a story that has been told the wrong way for so long?" By drawing upon the direct stories of survivors, Smith further describes Whitney as "an open book, up under the sky" and a "healing," "ancestral" space. Telling untold stories is life-giving.

In his 2022 *Atlantic* article "Monuments to the Unthinkable," Smith explores Holocaust memorialization in Germany. He visits former concentration camps and memorials like Berlin's Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe. Smith is impressed by the breadth of German public memory, but also details surprising blind spots, most notably the frequent exclusion of Jewish perspectives that were "deemed too close to the subject matter." However, the past feels appropriately immediate in Germany to Smith. This is starkly different than in the U.S., where as recently as May 2024, a school board in Virginia "restored Confederate names" to local schools. Without public memory to anchor and unite us, nostalgia and racism, both veiled and overt, distort our storytelling and education. We repeat the same cycles of silence and oppression.

"It is impossible for any memorial to slavery to capture its full horror, or for any memorial to the Holocaust to express the full humanity of the victims," Smith concludes. "No stone in the ground can make up for a life." Still, he contends the "very act of attempting to remember" is rich soil for growing a new world. It begins with each of us, "ordinary people [who] are the conscience." If we let it, our conscience can compel us to honesty and action.

Sarah James is a writer, an editor, and the founder of *Clerestory Magazine.*

Left image from "The Children of Whitney" sculpture series at Whitney Plantation by Woodrow Nash / Photograph by Elsa Hahne / Composite illustration by Ryan McQuade

Books



JOY, EVEN IN THE CEMETERY

This Sweet Earth: Walking with Our Children in the Age of Climate Collapse, by Lydia Wylie-Kellermann
Broadleaf

Lydia Wylie-Kellermann has a large cemetery in her backyard. There lie "weeds and tulips and a few homemade tombstones ... beloved fish, brutally attacked chickens, stray cats, and two beloved rabbits." In this cemetery, her two preteen sons, Isaac and Cedar, and wife Erinn Fahey host a lot of funerals. Why? Living during climate collapse means we must face death with dignity.

Approaching mortality with gentleness is just one of many lessons woven throughout *This Sweet Earth: Walking with Our Children in the Age of Climate Collapse.* Reading the book feels like listening to stories shared by a friend over a glass of sweet tea.

This Sweet Earth is filled with narratives from Wylie-Kellermann's life as an activist, parent, and watershed-dweller. Every chapter is benedicted by corresponding prayers and blessings, which affirm that Wylie-Kellermann was brought up on a diet of poetry and anti-nuclear pamphlets. Former editor of *Geez* magazine and daughter of protest prophet Bill Wylie-Kellermann and organizer and writer Jeanie Wylie-Kellermann, Lydia chooses words with precision, power, and a bit of whimsy.

* * *

"BLESS THIS PLACE WITH YOUR OWN TEARS UNTIL IT BECOMES MUD."

Wisdom like "Bless this place with your own tears until it becomes mud" and "Release your superiority. / Rejoice in your wild mortal flesh" effortlessly sits on the page across from stories of flood and local climate catastrophe.

From watching civil disobedience actions to baking bread without a recipe, the stories of Wylie-Kellermann's family show the reader a playful and prophetic perspective that makes awe possible in the face of despair.

I got a peek inside of this world when I visited the Kirkridge Retreat and Study Center where Wylie-Kellermann serves as executive director. One evening I joined a group at a Samhain bonfire where we named loved ones who had passed on to the other side. My grandfather had died earlier in the year, and as I said his name and shared his love of tomatoes with the group, I felt close to the veil between life and death. In real life, as in the text, Wylie-Kellermann creates moments of authentic connection with the earth.

One such courageous moment occurs in the book when her son Cedar asks if human beings will become extinct. Wylie-Kellermann wrestles with how to answer her son's existential wonderings, bringing the reader along the winding path toward the uncertain truth: "Maybe," she tells him, before explaining her response to readers: "We don't have all the answers. We tell [children] what we know. And we hold their hand and tell them we are going to figure it out together."

For parents seeking advice on how to raise young ones through climate change, this book offers both substantial and whimsical advice: Unplug, plant seeds, embrace cemeteries, and honor burials. For those who aren't raising children but find themselves in meaningful relationships with kids and elders, this book redirects climate anxiety toward reconnection and enchantment. I found myself wanting to re-up my local CSA box and dice garlic for a warm soup.

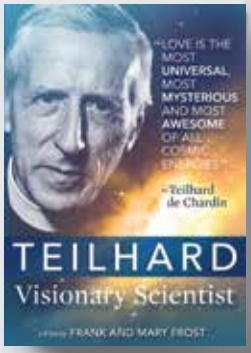
In *This Sweet Earth,* Wylie-Kellermann invites you to come to the table (or bonfire, farm, or funeral) and encourages you to bring any despair, worry, and anxiety with you. If your heart is worn and your spirit is sulking, pick up this book. The delicious prose will make you love the earth again.

Kaeley McEvoy is the fellowship program director and staff chaplain for Sojourners.

'AN EXUBERANCE OF LIFE AND A YEARNING TO LIVE'

Teilhard: Visionary Scientist, by Frank and Mary Frost

PBS



In some ways it's hard to appreciate today the significance of Jesuit paleontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. Much of what he wrote that was then viewed as heresy by the Catholic Jesuit Order—that the story of Adam and Eve is not scientific fact; that God's creative work did not end with Genesis, but rather continues through evolution; that the entire material universe is at its core spiritual and grace-filled—are ideas that are now widely accepted within the church. In fact, Teilhard's thoughts on the sacramentality of the world lie unabashedly at the heart of much of what Pope Francis has said about the environment.

The new PBS documentary *Teilhard: Visionary Scientist* paints a masterful and unexpectedly emotional portrait of this French priest who spent his life suffering for his love of the church and the world. Beginning with his youth and drawing frequently on his own words, *Visionary Scientist* walks with Teilhard as he is dazzled by the wonders of nature around his family's home in Auvergne, then follows him into the Jesuits, where he's taught that a religious vocation requires one to shun the world, to view it with contempt.

Teilhard is sent by the Jesuits to various places—Egypt, the English countryside, and later China—which reinforces his understanding of the world itself as the ongoing movement of God's spirit. He writes passionately about his experiences, unaware that such thinking might get him into trouble. "I love the universe, its energies, its secrets, and its hopes, and ... at the same time I am dedicated to God," he wrote in 1916. "That, above all, is the message I wish to communicate: the reconciliation of God and the world."

Much of the power of the documentary arrives in the second hour, as Teilhard finds himself exiled from Paris after his comments about evolution lead the order to conclude he does not accept the story of Adam and Eve. In the decades to come, he finds himself again and again rejected by the Jesuits, despite his every attempt to make it clear that he is trying to help the church, not undermine it. His most important and celebrated works, including *The Phenomenon of Man,* would not be published until after his death, and then only because he accepted the advice of another Jesuit to bequeath his writings to a non-Jesuit.

* * *

"I LOVE THE UNIVERSE, ITS ENERGIES, ITS SECRETS, AND ITS HOPES."

In the documentary, co-producers Frank and Mary Frost, through the narrator, Franciscan brother Greg Friedman, allow Teilhard to speak for himself—a deeply meaningful choice, given the decades Teilhard was silenced. For as much as Teilhard suffered, his prose is profoundly hopeful, the words of a person in love and excited to share it. He begins one essay, "What follows springs from an exuberance of life and a yearning to live."

Even near the end of his life, having been exiled permanently from his home and family, Teilhard writes to his superior general in Rome, "What might have been taken as my attitude during the last 30 years for obstinacy or disrespect, is simply the result of my absolute inability to contain my own feeling of wonderment." To watch *Teilhard: Visionary Scientist* is to come in touch with that effervescent, infectious wonder.

Jim McDermott is a freelance screen and magazine writer in New York.



cont'd from page 38 to linger more than anything. "A lot of people call it outsider art," he said. "They talk about that, but if they didn't talk about God almighty in there, I'd get sick."

Salvation Mountain is labeled outsider art, or folk art, because it was created by someone who was not trained as an artist. Patterson wrote that the "category of outsider art is itself problematic. It is a category too broad to connect its occupants except by suggesting that they are not the 'us' of the art world. It is also a category that lumps together mental illness and religious passion, suggesting that the two are rooted in the same cause. ... The category creates class systems within the art world."

Salvation Mountain has become, even after Knight's death, a public space and a witness that colorfully proclaims that "God is love" on top of, and next to, legacies of military power and harm. I often feel the guilty tension of what it means to live and exist as a Christian in this country. The taxes I pay help fund wars and genocides abroad. The technology I use drives the extraction of resources in an already hurting landscape. Surrounded by empire, how does my life proclaim "GOD IS LOVE" in bright, breathing letters?

On another mountain—which some scholars think might be Mount Hermon, a peak that spans borders and whose snowmelt waters poplar and pine groves—Jesus' transfiguration happened. His face dazzled like a desert sun; God called him "beloved." The three disciples who were with Jesus on the mountain fell to the ground in awe and fear. Jesus reached out to them and said, "Get up and do not be afraid."

Mountains are holy, lonely places where revelations and transformations of hearts happen. Standing on top of Salvation Mountain, beholding the landscape and Knight's life work, I felt how necessary it is in this world to get up and follow God without fear.

"Jesus I love you for yesterday," Knight said. "Hello God, I'm your friend." ⊗

Cassidy Klein, a former *Sojourners* fellow, is a journalist living in Chicago.

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Poetry

ALTERNATIVE SCENARIO

By Yahia Lababidi



After the horrors of October 7
the good people of Palestine rushed
to the sides of stricken Israelis

Tending to the wounded,
mourning the dead,
comforting survivors

They kept vigil, praying & weeping
delivering truckloads of flowers
serving trays, by day, of warm meals & sweets

Palestinian families flooded the streets
en masse, protesting: Not in our Names
demanding the return of hostages

Recognizing the great need, they gifted
what they, too, longed for: mercy, solace, solidarity—
and the world, witnessing, never forgot ...

Helpless, Hamas eventually surrendered,
the Israeli government, in turn, relented
and walls in hearts crumbled, then tumbled.

Yahia Lababidi, an Arab American of Palestinian background, is an author and poet. This poem is from Lababidi's forthcoming collection, *Palestine Wail,* dedicated to his Palestinian grandmother.

Illustration by Irina Naji

LEARN AND EMPOWER WITH COURAGEOUS CONVERSATIONS



Sojourners' president Adam R. Taylor, center, engages in conversations on anti-poverty legislation at a Circle of Protection gathering in June 2023.

Are you eager to engage in conversations about the election this year, but unsure how to approach polarizing political topics?

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SOJOURNERS

WHO TELLS OUR 'DEFINITIVE STORY'?

Scripture passages are from the Revised Common Lectionary, Cycle B

By Raj Nadella



Living the Word
September

In his influential book *Orientalism,* Palestinian literary critic Edward W. Said articulated the symbiotic relationship between knowledge and power. Said observed that people in power often get to produce knowledge, and they produce it in ways that justify and enhance their privilege. Such a symbiotic relationship between knowledge and power plays out in books, movies, art, and other cultural venues. In the context of European colonialism, Western artists and intellectuals did the empire's bidding by caricaturing cultures in the global South as barbaric and inferior to European culture. Empires employ such caricatures to justify conquest and advance political and economic interests. Such distortions promote narratives that deflect attention from the mechanisms of conquest and, in many cases, pit colonized communities against each other.

It matters who gets to tell whose story. How they are told and to what end matters as well. Empires continue to manufacture modes of knowledge—in the form of caricatures, false narratives, and single stories devoid of nuance—and weaponize them against the oppressed. This phenomenon of promoting single stories occurs in biblical interpretation too and in the scriptures themselves. As Christians, charged with being "good news" among the oppressed, we can unveil the mechanisms by which dominant groups produce knowledge to advance their own interests. How are we perpetuating single stories or false narratives to the detriment of ourselves and others? It's a task that requires intellectual acumen as well as intellectual humility.

Raj Nadella is the Samuel A. Cartledge associate professor of New Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary in Georgia.

* * *

PEOPLE IN POWER OFTEN PRODUCE KNOWLEDGE IN WAYS THAT ENHANCE THEIR PRIVILEGE.

SEPTEMBER 1

CHALLENGE SINGLE STORIES

SONG OF SOLOMON 2:8-13; PSALM 45:1-2, 6-9; JAMES 1:17-27; MARK 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

In a widely watched TED Talk, Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie warns of the perils of perpetuating "single stories" about individuals and communities who are different from us. Adichie offers an incisive critique of the politics of storytelling, and notes that "power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person but to make it the definitive story."

In an attempt to explain Jewish customs to a Gentile audience, the Markan narrator writes that the "Pharisees, and *all the Jews,* do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands," and follows up with other generalizations (7:3-4). The text presents Pharisaic and Jewish traditions in stereotypical terms. Mark's placement of the text in parentheses is as intriguing as the content itself. It amounts to a narrative aside, a mild version of what we might call a "subtweet," away from the earshot of characters about whom it is written.

Mark's account of Jewish rituals caricatures the community in harmful ways and robs from readers our ability to understand the nuances. Just as Jesus reinterprets sacred text, so are we invited to complexify truth and push back against stereotypes. How can we become more aware of the single stories we promote and consider their problematic implications?

SEPTEMBER 8

BEWARE EMPIRE'S TACTICS

ISAIAH 35:4-7; PSALM 146; JAMES 2:1-17; MARK 7:24-37

A few years ago, a cartoon made the rounds on social media featuring a CEO, a laborer, and a foreigner sitting at a table. In it, the CEO has a huge plate of cookies in front of him, the laborer has one cookie, and the immigrant has none. The CEO turns to the laborer and says, "Careful mate. That foreigner wants your cookie!" It's a clear attempt to shift attention from the CEO's hoarding.

First-century historian Flavius Josephus describes the ongoing tensions between Jews and the residents of Tyre described in Mark's gospel. The two colonized communities fought over several issues but primarily the limited resources left after the Roman Empire siphoned off what it wanted. Rome successfully deflected attention from its economic prac-

Illustration by Jocelyn O'Leary

tices by convincing colonized communities that they could survive only by eliminating competition from other oppressed groups. This led to a mindset of scarcity among colonized communities.

What is articulated by Jesus' reluctance to grant the Syrophoenician woman's request for a miracle? Is it fear that if "the food" (or the benefits of the new kingdom) is extended to her community, then Jewish people would lose out? Is it a zero-sum game in which one or the other can enjoy it, but not both? The woman's riposte insightfully insists that her community gaining access to the gifts of the kingdom will not deprive Jesus' community of theirs. In the two feeding stories that sandwich this story, Jesus challenged the mindset of scarcity. An extension of the woman's insight is that the two communities need not fight for meager resources but should expose imperial hoarding practices. Empires often pit marginalized communities against each other to distract from oppressive practices. Beware of this trap.

SEPTEMBER 15

CONFESSION VS. ACTION

ISAIAH 50:4-9; PSALM 116:1-9; JAMES 3:1-12; MARK 8:27-38

In Mark's gospel, Peter comes across as impulsive. He is quick to confess that Jesus is the Messiah (Mark 8:29). He gets Jesus' identity right when most, including his fellow disciples, do not. But things change quickly when Jesus articulates his destiny as the Messiah (8:31-32). The Greek word *dei* (translated as "it is necessary") that captures Jesus' assertion that the Messiah must suffer implies that suffering is intrinsically connected to his identity and mission of challenging the empire. Jesus does not glorify suffering but lays bare the inevitable cost of promoting justice.

Peter knew what being messiah entailed but seems unwilling to let Jesus go that route. He boldly and eloquently confesses Jesus' identity but makes a futile effort to steer Jesus away from his messianic mission. Later, he even offers to build Jesus a tent so he could stay there comfortably with Elijah and Moses (9:5). Peter has the right belief about Jesus but not the commitment to live out that confession of faith. Alas, eloquent confessions don't always translate into commitment to justice, in Peter's case or in ours.

Confessions are essential for articulating a church's identity, or at least facilitating conversations about it. Yet, the Body of Christ has spent too much time, both historically and in the present, trying to get its confessions "right," while devoting far less energy toward ensuring that confessions translate into actions integral to our Christian identity. Confessions can become substitutes for concrete actions toward justice, especially when the latter requires confronting the powers or making substantial sacrifices. Do our confessions and creeds propel us to action, or have they become facades that hide our inability to carry the cross?

SEPTEMBER 22

ARROGANCE AND HUMILITY

JEREMIAH 11:18-20; PSALM 54; JAMES 3:13-4:3, 7-8; MARK 9:30-37

Who doesn't appreciate Jesus' words "whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all" (Mark 9:35)? We certainly know leaders who have modeled humility and risen in ranks. Commenting on Jesus' suggestion that whoever welcomes the little one in his name welcomes him, John Donahue and Daniel Harrington note that "in Aramaic the word *talya* can mean both 'servant' and 'child'" (9:36-37). Within this literary context, Jesus was likely suggesting that whoever welcomes the servant welcomes him and by extension, God. The act of serving others reveals the essence of the divine more than anything else and elevates the servant. It sounds like an ideal and rewarding trajectory, yet it is only one strand of the story. The humble are not always lifted up. At times, the arrogant rise meteorically to gain immense power (see Psalm 73).

Lately, there's been much talk in the U.S. and around the world about the need for strong leaders, with little emphasis on humility or servant leadership. The virtue of humility has been weaponized against women and people of color who are told to be humble and yield to those already endowed with power and privilege. The emphasis on humility as a virtue should be read in tension with other stories (such as that of John the Baptist) where those at the margins refuse to humbly submit to oppression. If we only highlight humility in ways that require those at the margins to embrace it, then we play into the hands of the powerful and do a disservice to the gospel.

* * *

CONFESSIONS CAN BECOME SUBSTITUTES FOR CONCRETE ACTIONS TOWARD JUSTICE.

SEPTEMBER 29

IS GOD ON YOUR SIDE?

ESTHER 7:1-10, 9:20-22; PSALM 124; JAMES 5:13-20; MARK 9:38-50

In Psalm 124, the psalmist sings passionately about how God has protected God's people from the clutches of Pharaoh. "If it had not been the Lord who was on our side, when our enemies attacked us, then they would have swallowed us up alive" (verses 2-3). God sides with the community in a particularly precarious moment. Similarly, the story of Queen Esther highlights how she thwarts, through prayer and a savvy strategy, arrogant Haman's diabolical plot to eliminate her community. Over the centuries, many have misappropriated biblical texts, such as Psalm 124, to claim that God is on *their* side—whichever side that is.

Western colonial interpreters employed such texts to advance the idea that God sanctions their conquest and justifies violence against the conquered. Neither Psalm 124 nor similar texts lend themselves to the suggestion God supports *any* of our specific agendas. To build on the insights of Catholic theologian Raimon Panikkar: Claiming that God sides with us and against others amounts to profound irreverence for God. To place God on *our* side is to deny that God chooses God's own sides. God *does* take sides, but not that of any individual or nation. When God takes a side, it's an action rooted in love, compassion, and justice—all quintessential aspects of the divine nature. To paraphrase Gustavo Gutiérrez, God invariably aligns with the oppressed, and the oppressed vary depending on the historical context. ⊗

"Living the Word" continues on the next page with reflections for October.

JUSTICE, BUT ON WHOSE TERMS?

Scripture passages are from the Revised Common Lectionary, Cycle B

By Raj Nadella



Living the Word
October

This summer, the Biden administration issued an executive order imposing harsh limits on those seeking asylum at the U.S.-Mexico border and intensified deportations of those who no longer qualify to stay in the U.S. In the ensuing debate, many have argued that the new limits violate U.S. laws and treaty obligations. There is genuine outrage about the immorality of denying refuge to those seeking protection on our soil—an act that ignores the role the U.S. has played in fomenting political crises in many of the originating nations. Biden's immigration policies have been fairly humane; this new policy is disappointing.

Immigration and refugee crises are always subject to becoming weaponized, and they are thus issues of vulnerability for politicians. The former administration demonized immigrants and imposed extremely harsh family separation policies. Refugees and asylum seekers become collateral damage in political partisanship—but these are real families fleeing real threats. Justice should serve the powerless, not the powerful, however well-intentioned the powerful may be. In summer 2013, Congress nearly passed a bipartisan comprehensive immigration reform bill. At the last moment, far-right members of the House of Representatives scuttled years of work. A successful bill would have made immigration far less of a political football and provided immigrants a more stable path to citizenship. Justice should be executed based on the hopes and existential needs of those adversely impacted by unjust structures and policies—both past and present.

Raj Nadella is the Samuel A. Cartledge associate professor of New Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary in Georgia.

* * *

WHAT IS LEGAL IS NOT ALWAYS MORALLY SOUND OR JUST.

OCTOBER 6

BEYOND THE LEGAL

GENESIS 2:18-24; PSALM 8;
HEBREWS 1:1-4, 2:5-12; MARK 10:2-16

Most of us have met people who ask questions to which they already know the answers. Mark (10:2) depicts the Pharisees asking Jesus, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" They already knew that it was lawful. The first-century divorce process characteristically differed from the modern process, but the Greek word *éxesti* ("legal" or "lawful") refers to what was permitted under the law. The Pharisees' question considers legality of the process but not the plight of women impacted by it. The verb *apolyō* ("divorce") has a range of meanings, but in the context of this conversation, it describes sending the woman away in ways that undermined her interests. The Pharisees knew how harmful the process was to the woman and hence the question of whether it was legal. It was indeed legal, but they should have asked if it was moral for a man to exercise such power over a woman. In another Markan story (12:13-17), the Pharisees and Herodians ask if it is lawful to pay taxes to Caesar. Of course, it was legal and—to avoid death—absolutely required, but whether it was moral and theologically just is another matter.

Laws are fundamental to building social trust and protecting the rights of individuals. However, laws must be responsive to change. To build on philosopher Immanuel Kant's wisdom, what is legal is not always morally sound or just. Laws are often written by and for the powerful. A legal system can be weaponized against those with little power. This dissonance between the legal and the moral exists in our legal system today. It is "legal" to hold thousands of immigrants and refugees in inhumane detention facilities—though it is deeply immoral. Many states "legally" deny women reproductive health care, without acknowledging the moral obligation to

Illustration by Tomekah George

each woman and family's human dignity. Sometimes, a narrow focus on the law undermines our ability to address important moral dimensions in our society. As we approach national elections, Christians can help parse the difference between legal and moral. We can insist that our politicians uphold high moral standards and exercise wisdom when making or enforcing laws.

OCTOBER 13

RAISE THE BAR

AMOS 5:6-7, 10-15; PSALM 90:12-17; HEBREWS 4:12-16; MARK 10:17-31

Several years ago, I attended an anti-racism workshop. Many of the white participants called attention to some egregious acts of racism in the U.S. They criticized police brutality against African Americans, denial of housing loans to minorities, and discrimination in the criminal justice system. These Christians were implicitly asserting that they would never engage in or tolerate such blatant acts of racism. But then the conversation shifted toward the issue of reparations. There was an awkward and uncomfortable silence, as if to say: "Who can meet such a high bar?"

The privileged man in Mark 10:17 seems well-intentioned. He wants to earn eternal life by doing the right thing. He's eager to show Jesus that he's virtuous, has fulfilled the commandments, and has led a just life. "Not so fast," Jesus responds. As Jesus lists some of the commandments, he warns against "defrauding" (verse 19) and uses the Greek verb *apostereō*, a word that connotes depriving others of something significant. The rich man may not have tricked people out of their money, but by hoarding wealth, he defrauded others of the most basic things in life. Accordingly, Jesus asks him to raise the bar: "Sell what you have, and give to the poor" (verse 21). Put your money where your theology is. The bar is too high for this privileged young man, who quietly walks away. He might have been amenable to making some donations, but he wasn't ready for the deep structural conversion Jesus suggests.

Virtue-signaling is *not* a Christian attribute; embedding virtues of humility and self-sacrifice into the core of our lives is. Justice, in the biblical tradition, is determined by God, not by power elites. Laws are to limit the excesses of the strong and protect the rights of the weak. When the bar gets raised on what is needed to create justice, Jesus invites the privileged to act courageously, even when it hurts our self-interest.

OCTOBER 20

COMPLEX NARRATIVES

ISAIAH 53:4-12; PSALM 91:9-16; HEBREWS 5:1-10; MARK 10:35-45

Barbara Kingsolver's novel *The Poisonwood Bible* employs five distinct voices in an engaging manner to weave a family's difficult story into a complex broader one of mission and colonialism in Congo. In the hands of a skillful writer, this can be done effectively. As we read Psalm 91 this week, let's pay attention to its narrative structure, the different voices it employs, and how structure and voice engage each other. Hebrew Bible scholar Patrick D. Miller notes that sections of Psalm 91 are narrated in two distinct voices: the voice of the priest (verses 9-13) and the divine voice (verses 14-16). In the first part, the priest's voice addresses the supplicant in a time of extreme danger and heightens expectation of divine intervention. "If you say, 'The Lord is my refuge' ... no harm will overtake you" (verse 9-10). The priest presents God as a reliable refuge and assures the individual of divine protection. Then God's voice responds, addressing the supplicant directly: "Because [you] love me," says the Lord, "I will rescue [you]." God's care, nurture, and protection of the individual stand out as defining features of this psalm. A seamless transition occurs between the two parts and voices. It is as if God is eavesdropping on the priest and the supplicant, and then decides to chime in. The voices reveal a relationship defined by intimacy, absolute trust, and mutuality rather than by servitude. This beautiful psalm showcases divine power in service to a vulnerable individual.

* * *

JESUS TREATS BARTIMAEUS AS A PARTNER IN THE PROCESS RATHER THAN AN OBJECT OF COMPASSION.

OCTOBER 27

MORE THAN BREAD

JEREMIAH 31:7-9; PSALM 126; HEBREWS 7:23-28; MARK 10:46-52

Who in their right mind would throw away a prized possession? In Mark's gospel, Bartimaeus, the "blind beggar," did exactly that when he cast aside his cloak to run toward Jesus (10:50). William Blake's 1799 painting "Christ Giving Sight to Bartimaeus" captures this fascinating detail. Both the Markan account and Blake suggest that Bartimaeus saw the possibility of a new life with Jesus and opened himself up to it by symbolically throwing away his cloak. He saw his new life before he regained his physical sight.

As a "blind beggar," Bartimaeus was doubly marginalized. He is one of the very few in the gospels to acknowledge Jesus as son of David; he later calls Jesus "rabboni." Ironically, Bartimaeus sees Jesus in ways most others do not. In turn, Jesus acknowledges him and invites him on the Way. In Blake's religious imagination, Jesus stretches out his hand in a gesture of friendship, not yet in healing. Jesus asks, "What do you want me to do for you?" Jesus does not presume to know the answer. He doesn't assume that Bartimaeus wants charity or even healing. Jesus opens the space for Bartimaeus to decide for himself. As it turns out, this "beggar" *can* be a chooser. Jesus treats him as a partner in the process rather than an object of compassion. The "beggar" does *not* ask for alms but rather the ability to see again. Bartimaeus does not want just a slice of bread to fill his belly. He's looking for something much more profound. Jesus shows that when we have the power to make a difference in others' lives, we should not drive the agenda, however well-intentioned we might be. Jesus models letting the one with the need decide what they want. Only Bartimaeus knew what was best for Bartimaeus. ⊗

"Preaching the Word," Sojourners' online resource for sermon preparation and Bible study, is available at sojo.net/ptw.

H'rumphs



VEGGIE HAUNTED

By Beth Cooper Chrismon

The vegetables are trying to kill me. I am drowning in vegetables. I clock out of my home office, and there are the vegetables. I take weekend trips, come home, and there are the vegetables. I can't sleep, because deep in the corners of my mind, the vegetables are there—slowly rotting, mocking me, blaming me for their inevitable demise.

This is not a horror movie. This is a CSA subscription.

Short for "community-supported agriculture," CSAs provide subscribers a selection of farm-fresh seasonal produce every week. They are a sustainable and often cost-effective way to eat local and give back to your community. They are also a terrific way to spend hours chopping vegetables and Googling "kohlrabi."

In the pre-pandemic years, I, a black-and-white-moral-thinking-trying-to-do-right no-matter-the-cost twentysomething, signed up for a CSA every spring. Rarely have I experienced more anxiety, more rage, and more helplessness than when faced with a brand-new "single-sized" (but still enormous) bag of produce while most of the previous week's veggies remained untouched and rapidly softening. Yet I, ever the Good Consumer, stressed myself silly over produce season after season, because what choice did I have? I couldn't *destroy the planet.*

Starting with the COVID lockdown in 2020, I went through a food journey in parallel with a broader mental health journey. I gained several diagnoses and several medication prescriptions. Under the assumption that I would rarely have the energy to cook (let alone cook with fresh produce), I rebuilt my food routine. I learned that "there are no bad foods" also applies to convenience foods and delivery orders, not just foods society deems "unhealthy." I learned how ableism and food consumption interact. I started drinking a lot more Diet Coke. (Shhh. I just said there are no bad foods. You can't make fun of me.)

* * *

I AM GRATEFUL FOR THE MICROPLASTICS BECAUSE THEY KEPT ME ALIVE; ALSO, YOU ARE WHAT YOU EAT.

Gradually my life and mind stabilized, and I had more energy than I'd had in a long time—all thanks to DoorDash and many ready-made meals that have, I'm sure, pumped me full of microplastics. I am grateful for the microplastics because they kept me alive; also, you are what you eat.

This brings me back to the CSA. This spring I thought: Why not return to this as a now medicated thirtysomething armed with the power of microplastics? Surely, I can become the Perfect Consumer and not regret it this time? My compost bag of wilted lettuce (God, why is it always lettuce?) laughed in my face.

But luckily for me—and for you, dear readers, who have been waiting patiently for me to get to the point—I *did* gain some things from this. As I chopped piles of kohlrabi (a real thing, it turns out, related to broccoli), teeth gritted, I repeated to myself: "This will build character. This will help me become more flexible. This will increase my distress tolerance." My veggie-induced mantra slowly began to bear fruit (bear vegetable?). (If my therapist is reading this, please wipe that smug smile off your face.)

The more I work with the vegetables, the less mental energy I use each time a new bag comes in. If I don't use the kohlrabi, that's fine, because perfection isn't the goal. Perfection is a Sisyphean task that helps only the people on top of the literal and figurative "food chain" of our unjust food systems.

So, next time you are haunted by the specter of vegetables in your fridge, maybe they aren't mocking you. (Or maybe they're *lovingly* mocking you.) They may have something worthwhile to tell you if you're ready to listen, and chop, and chop some more. ⊗

Beth Cooper-Chrismon is director of individual giving at Sojourners.

Illustration by Melanie Lambrick

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