

# Brian Zahnd

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On January 19, 2021 by Brian Zahnd

## The Dangerous Heresy of Christian Nationalism



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The insurrectionist attack upon the Capitol on January 6 was the most disturbing American moment since 9/11. Like millions of others I watched this awful event with grief-stricken horror on live television. As an angry mob of aggrieved Trump supporters surged up the Capitol steps, I saw among the flags and banners a “Jesus Saves” sign. My first thought was, “that’s what it means to take the name of the Lord in vain.” Among the Proud Boys, Oath Keepers, white supremacists, and QAnon theorists, there were Christian nationalists who honestly believed they were somehow serving Jesus by participating in a violent insurrection. On January 6 we saw the danger of Christian nationalism on full display.

Christian nationalism is the idolatrous conflation of Christian faith with American patriotism. Those under the sway of Christian nationalism essentially confuse America for the kingdom of God. The Bill of Rights is held as sacred as the Beatitudes and the Second Amendment is as revered as the Second Commandment (“Love your neighbor as yourself”). Baptismal identity is eclipsed by national identity and rightwing politics overshadows the Sermon on the Mount.

I don’t place too much blame on rank-and-file Christians who have departed from the true faith for the idolatry of religious nationalism — they are the inevitable disciples created by forty years of evangelical nationalism. But I do blame the pastors, preachers, and false prophets who have led the sheep down this disastrous path. Franklin Graham, Jerry Falwell Jr., Pat Robertson, Paula White, Robert Jeffress, and all the rest share a deep culpability in the distortion of Christian faith into the heresy of religious nationalism. They should know better.

I know the world of Christian nationalism well. I was in it for a long time. One of the speakers at the “Prayer To Save America” rally just prior to the attack on the Capitol was on our pastoral staff sixteen years ago. On January 6 he stood on a platform with a worship team amidst flags festooned with slogans like, “Stop the Steal,” “Fight for Trump,” and “The Right to Keep and Bear Arms.” With the practiced cadence of a preacher this Pentecostal pastor said,

“We’re not fighting for a victory, we’re fighting from a victory! We serve a resurrected Jesus! Does anybody think America is worth fighting for? Does anybody think the Second Amendment is worth fighting for? Let the District of Communists know you’re here! Come on patriots!”

The crowd roared. And then attacked the Capitol. That “serving a resurrected Jesus” could be employed as a battle cry for a violent insurrection reveals the depth of distortion the gospel is subjected to in the hands of Christian nationalists.

As I said, I know this world well. I began to follow Jesus as a teenager during the Jesus Movement of the 1970s. But by the 1980s the Jesus Movement was over, the Religious Right was on the rise, and I went along for the ride. I went along for the ride because I had been lulled to sleep. But in my mid-forties I suddenly woke up. An alarm clock had gone off in my soul. In an astonishing way I realized I was tangled up in red, white, and blue. I thought, how did we get here? We didn’t start out as radical followers of Jesus only to end up being duped by a cadre of prosperity gospel hucksters and religious right power-mongers!

So I revolted and rediscovered (at great cost) the counterculture faith I first knew as a teenager. Though the road back home was sometimes painful, I’ve never once regretted my decision to return to the radical roots of a counterculture Christianity. It was a costly decision, but like the pearl of great price, it was worth it. And it’s why I wrote *Postcards From Babylon: The Church in American Exile*.

The most needed theological correction for American evangelicals at the moment is to learn to see America not as a kind of biblical Israel, but as a kind of biblical Babylon. Once we see America as a kind of Babylon — a superpower that seeks to encroach upon the sovereignty of God — then we can learn to live as faithful exiles in an idolatrous culture. This is the lesson set forth in the book of Daniel. It was also the experience of the early Christians in the Roman Empire. By virtue of their baptism they became exiles in the land of their birth. Their total fealty was pledged to Christ alone. Allegiance to empire was incompatible with their Christian confession.

Followers of Jesus have no business storming the seat of government to overturn the results of an election. We confess that Jesus is Lord and that is the reality we seek to embody. As believers we are called to the peaceable way of the Lamb — regardless of who occupies Palatine Hill or 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. The kingdom of God is already among us. As followers of Jesus we persuade by love, witness, Spirit, reason, rhetoric, and if need be, by martyrdom — but never by force. The violence we saw on January 6 came about in part as the result of Christian leaders preaching religious nationalism — and nothing could be more contrary to the kingdom of Christ.

When I wrote *Postcards From Babylon* in 2018 I did so from a compelling sense of urgency — I felt I had to respond to the crisis of fidelity within much of the American church. But I could never have anticipated that it would be even more relevant in 2021. And that’s why I’m so enthusiastic about the documentary film *Postcards From Babylon*. Filmmakers David and Kathi Peters have done an outstanding job with this project. The urgent task of our current moment is to call a church being seduced by the Siren song of nationalism back to its first love. In the film we hear from noted Christian scholars, thinkers and leaders like Walter Brueggemann, Shane Claiborne, Lisa Sharon Harper, Kristin Kobes Du Mez, Pete Wehner, and Scott Hancock. I’m honored to be a part of this important project. *Postcards From Babylon* is a beautiful way to re-evangelize Christians with the good news.