

4 Ways to Spot Christian Nationalism

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[0 : 00] Hello, Table Church. My name is Anthony Parrott. I get to serve as the lead pastor here, and we are going to get into the Bible, get into God's Word today.

We are coming up to the very end of our series called The Healing Love of Jesus, and we've been looking at the Gospel of Luke and how Jesus goes throughout his world and brings healing wherever he goes.

And if you know anything about the life of Jesus, you know that that healing often brought opposition and that people didn't always understand what Jesus was up to. Jesus had this band of disciples that were following him, and they would often push back or wonder or ask questions or simply not get what Jesus was doing.

And as I explored today's passage, Luke chapter 9 is where we're going to be, I saw some parallels to things that are going on in our country right now, and particularly how our country and Christianity have melded together into something called Christian nationalism.

And many of the same questions and mistakes and misunderstandings that Jesus' disciples made some 2,000 years ago, we can still make those mistakes today. So today's sermon is called Four Ways to Spot Christian Nationalism, or Cultural Christianity, or Religious Nominalism, or Christians in Name Only, or whatever you want to call it, Four Ways to Spot It When It's Going On.

[1 : 37] So if you have a Bible, I invite you to turn it on or flip it open to the Gospel of Luke chapter 9. We're going to start in verse 37. And to give you a little bit of context, Jesus just got done with that whole transfiguration thing.

And we've got a sermon on that from way back almost a year ago about the transfiguration and how it showed God's intention for humanity. It showed Jesus in his full, beautiful humanity and what that means.

And there's something interesting where Peter, one of the disciples who sees the transfiguration, wants to build some tents and stay there forever with Jesus. Jesus says, no, we've got to get back to work.

And so Jesus and the disciples go back down the mountain, and that is where we're going to pick up. So we're going to read, it's actually a longer passage we're going to read today, verses 37 through 50.

We're going to read kind of a chunk at a time and point out these four ways to spot Christian nationalism. So let's start with verses 37 through 42.

[2 : 43] It says this. It says, Jesus replies, You unbelieving and perverse generation, how long do I have to put up with you and stay with you?

And then to the dad, Jesus says, bring your son here. And even while the boy was coming, the demon, this is verse 42, the demon threw the boy to the ground in a convulsion, but Jesus rebuked the impure spirit, healed the boy, and gave him back to his father.

The first sign that we know that Christianity has been infected and mutated by Christian nationalism is when we are no longer able to offer healing to our neighborhoods, our city, and our world.

Wherever Jesus' followers are, they should be making the world look more and more like heaven, like the place where God's will happens, like the place where God's rule and reign and kingdom are. In Acts chapter 8, we're told the story about one of the disciples named Philip. And Philip goes to Samaria, and he starts healing and casting out demons and fixing systems of oppression.

[4 : 24] And it says in Acts 8 that there was great joy in the city. Where Christians are, there should be joy in the city. Yes, the followers of Jesus have shown up. Yay! When's the last time you've heard that happen?

How common is it today that someone can be like the father in the story that says, I begged your church, I begged the disciples to help out, but they didn't or they couldn't.

And honestly, how often does anybody actually even think of the church as the first place to go when the city or the neighborhood or the house has problems?

Is the church today, the church that you know of, the American church, are they on the forefront, the cutting edge of bringing healing and redemption and justice and reconciliation to the world?

Oftentimes the answer is no. It's not always no. It's really easy to score points on Twitter by throwing all of American Christianity and the church under the bus and to blame them for everything.

[5 : 32] There are faithful remnants and there are plenty of Christians and followers of Jesus and churches in the city, in the farmlands, and everywhere in between.

They're trying to bring healing. But oftentimes those churches are exceptional. They're the exception because they're not the expectation. When Christians are getting their hands dirty and rolling up their sleeves and getting to work and bringing healing to the world, they're looked at as an exception.

We were part of a church that helped build a neighborhood playground. And a newspaper writer came and said, Hey, can we write a story about you?

To which we said, No. No, thank you. It should not be news that a church group is helping, you know, build a playground in a neighborhood.

But how often do you see newspaper stories that point out the exceptional nature of a church that's, wow, really serving their community? This should not be newsworthy. It's exceptional because it's not the expectation.

[6 : 38] And when you look at the harm that's been perpetrated by the American church, harm done to queer folks and to immigrants and to indigenous peoples and to people of color and to the black community happening now, happening 400 years ago, up to now, and happening for the centuries and millennia, when you look at all the harm done in the name of Jesus, using the Bible as a reason to perpetuate this harm, it's no wonder most of this nation and much of the world has given up on the church as a place to bring healing and hope.

There are remnants. The black church in America has long been a standard bearer of hope and healing and reconciliation and justice. They have long served as prophets calling out injustice and evil.

But have we been listening? And we look at Jesus' words in verse 41 where Jesus says, you unbelieving, perverse generation, how long do I have to put up with you?

And we want to tame those words down. That's because it's easier to believe in a timid Jesus. It's easier to believe in a Jesus that never gets angry at anything or anyone.

It's easier to believe in a Jesus that sees demonic oppression, that sees sick children, that sees a culture of death, and simply says, aw, that's too bad. Rather, we need a Jesus of Scripture, the Jesus of strong emotions, of weeping and anger and his compassion.

[8 : 13] We need a Jesus that's willing to state a clear and forceful no to what's wrong and evil and unjust in the world. So one of the signs that Christianity has fallen prey to nationalism is when we are no longer expected to offer healing in our neighborhood, our cities, or our world.

But pay attention to what happens. Verse 42. Even when the boy was coming to Jesus, the demon threw him on the ground in a convulsion. Jesus rebuked the impure spirit and healed the boy and gave him back to his father.

When the church finally begins to stand up against what's wrong in the world, things are going to get worse before they get better. Things aren't easy just because we decide to take a stand against something.

Think about every diet you've started, every new habit or routine or discipline that you've begun, and then you hit that turn where there's a bit of resistance. Is that the sign of like, ah, I guess I got to quit now because there's a little bit of resistance?

No, it's the sign to keep going. When we begin to actually take our place in the world as the standard bearers of justice and healing, there's going to be resistance.

[9 : 30] But then the healing will come, friends. So that's number one sign of Christian nationalism, of no longer being a place where we're expected to bring healing into the world.

Sign number two is that when what is clear becomes hidden to us, we're too afraid to ask questions. We know that Jesus followers in the church have fallen prey to Christian nationalism.

When what is clear becomes hidden to us, we're afraid to ask questions. Let's take a look at verses 43 through 45. So Jesus heals this boy, hands him back to the father.

Everybody, there's a crowd with Jesus. They're always following Jesus, seeing what he's up to. They're amazed at the greatness of God, which, by the way, is Luke's subtle way of saying like, what Jesus does, God does.

Jesus and God might be the same person. Keeps going. While everyone is marveling at all that Jesus did, Jesus turns to his disciples. In the midst of the celebration about him, Jesus turns to his disciples and says this, Listen carefully to what I'm about to tell you.

[10:40] The son of man, I think in the Greek, it's literally let these words sink into your ears. The son of man, Jesus talking about himself, is going to be delivered into the hands of men.

Some translations say betrayed into the hands of men. But the disciples didn't understand what this meant. Listen to the repetition of Luke. They did not understand what this meant.

It was hidden from them, so they did not grasp it. And they were afraid to ask Jesus about it. We know that our way of life, of following Jesus, has been mutated by a form of Christian nationalism when we no longer see what's clear and true and we're too afraid to ask questions.

Jesus refuses to revel in being called great and marveled at, even being compared to God. He immediately changes the subject away from his greatness and instead changes the subject to being betrayed, delivered unto death.

Now, the disciples, they were brought up in a culture that saw the Messiah as a warrior God, a warrior king who would violently kill all of his enemies. And Jesus is trying to show a different way.

[11:52] Remember, just a couple chapters of before, Jesus talks about a whole different set of values, about loving enemies, loving those who do you harm, about turning the other cheek, about giving away the cloak and the shirt.

Jesus is showing a different way about sacrificing love for the sake of others. And Jesus is going to embody this to the point of death. But the disciples are so enculturated against this way of thinking that even when Jesus states it plainly, they don't understand.

In the same way, friends, there are some very clean, straight lines that we can draw from certain mainstream expressions of Christianity to the horrific realities in our nation.

For instance, take a look at the symbols used at the insurrection at the Capitol last month. Last month. Seems like an eternity ago.

A Christian flag. Somebody holding a Bible. A Jesus saves sign. And I could have put up dozens of more examples.

[13:00] The Capitol coup was a Christian uprising. It was bathed in prayer. Pastors participated and praised it. Crosses were erected.

Christian flags were waved. Bibles clutched. It was clear. And it was obvious. But what was clear and obvious became, no, no, no.

It was Antifa. It was BLM. It wasn't real Christians. No, we would never do that. As if Christians in America have this perfect record, spotless record against violence, against those who disagree. Have you read a history book? More clear, straight lines we could draw. A survey of 5,700 pastors showed that 71% of them would never advise a battered wife to leave her husband or separate because of abuse.

Another straight line we could draw. In 2020, the percentage of white Christians who said that race is not at all a problem in the United States increased. In 2020, more Christians than ever before said that race is not at all a problem for white Christians.

[14:16] According to the research of Samuel Perry and Andrew Whitehead, who are expert sociologists on Christian nationalism, those who identify with the tenets of Christian nationalism, are least likely to wear a mask to prevent the spread of COVID, most likely to distrust scientists and media, most likely to support strong anti-immigration, anti-LGBTQ, anti-feminist, anti-environmental, and anti-racial equality stances, and most likely to condone violence to support the above views.

What's become clear has become hidden. And we're afraid to ask questions. And I'm sure a lot of you are like, no, this is clear.

You're yelling at the screen. Tell me something I don't know. But we have to be willing to ask the right questions. How did this happen? How do we not become susceptible to the same dramatically

wrong-headed thinking?

And what are we, what am I missing right now that's clear, but I've become blinded to because of my own prejudices and biases and self-affirmations?

What questions do I need to be asking about the environment and how I treat it? Or about my obsession with politics? Or about what questions do, we all need to be asking about, the health effects of pornography?

[15:37] Or the intersection of abortion rights and disability rights? Or the clothes that I wear and who makes them in what country? Look, friends, just because we get to say, I am not a participant in the capital coup, just because we get to call ourselves progressive Christians, because we get to affirm so-called radical things like LGBTQ lives should be treated with the same rights as everyone else, and Black Lives Matter, so-called radical views like that, it doesn't mean that we've arrived.

We've got it all figured out. It doesn't mean that we, finally, 21 centuries later, have perfected Christianity like no one has before. We must always be seeking to taking off, always be seeking to take off our own cultural blinders, our own confirmation biases, and always looking towards the way of Jesus and listening to the Holy Spirit as she awakens our conscience so that there are no questions, no questions that we're too afraid to ask of ourselves, of our church, of our tradition.

So, sign number one is that we no longer offer healing to the world. Sign number two, when what becomes clear becomes hidden to us and we're too afraid to ask.

Sign number three, that our faith is being betrayed by Christian nationalism is when those of other status are rejected instead of welcomed.

Let's take a look at verses 46 through 48. So, Jesus just got done saying, the Son of Man, Jesus, is going to be trained into the hands of men. They don't understand.

[17:20] They're too afraid to ask questions. So, instead, they turn to their favorite hobby. Verse 46, an argument started among the disciples as to which of them would be the greatest. Great.

Glad, glad, glad that they spent their time on something. So, worthwhile. And Jesus, knowing their thoughts, took a little child and had him stand behind him, which very likely could be the same child that Jesus just healed.

And then Jesus said to the disciples, whoever welcomes this little child in my name welcomes me. And whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.

For it is the one who is the least among you. who is the greatest. Now, something to pay attention to here is that Jesus uses a specific and technical term for the word welcome.

Both Jewish and Greco-Roman societies were honor-shame societies. And this meant that all social interactions with your wife, with your kids, with the neighbor, with the people you did business with, with the person you paid taxes to, with the governor authorities, with the slaves or servants in your home, every relationship was calculated based off of who was of equal, lesser, or greater social status.

[18:38] And honor and shame were a form of social currency that you could gain or lose.

Welcome, what Jesus talks about when welcoming, welcoming the child, welcome was the specific kind of hospitality that you offered someone of equal or greater status than you.

You simply did not welcome those of lower social status, particularly the lowest social statuses of women, slaves, and children.

They were meant to welcome you if you're a man of any sort of social status. They welcome you, not the other way around. And so when Jesus takes a child, conceivably the same child that was just moments ago demon-possessed and sick, and puts them in front of these 12 male disciples, disciples who were business owners, tax collectors, people of some social status, and Jesus says, you welcome the child.

Jesus is breaking the cultural norms. Jesus had just told them that he was going to be betrayed. He is preparing the disciples for his eventual departure.

Jewish scholar Amy Jo Levine puts it like this, Jesus is going away. One way of keeping his presence alive is to welcome those who lack power and authority, the most vulnerable, the ones most susceptible to attack.

[20:13] In other words, if you want more Jesus in your life, welcome those of the other social status. Now, it is far too easy for modern Christians to hear this and completely miss the point, and think it's all about charity, and altruism, and making ourselves feel better.

We get to be the voice for the so-called voiceless, while actually not dismantling the systems of power and oppression that made the marginalized put into the margins in the first place.

When Jesus said, welcome the children, it didn't just mean infantilize them and continue to treat them as less than, but just be nicer about it. It means assume that they have the higher social status than you do, the greater thing to offer that they are the ones who are over you.

And, of course, Jesus says this not just of children, but of anyone that we might be tempted to consider other. I think about this in terms of the disabled community.

Reverend Miriam Spies says this. She says, for countless years, people with disabilities have been understood to be the recipients of ministry, not ministry leaders.

[21 : 32] As we push the church and society to become more physically and relationally accessible, we also challenge others to recognize us as having gifts to offer communities of faith.

For many people with disabilities who articulate a call to leadership, the church is often an obstacle rather than a nurturer of that ministry. And I think the same thing could be said of anyone who doesn't happen to be white, straight, able-bodied, cis male.

Well, how are we going to minister to fill in the blank, the black community, the immigrant community, the women? No, that's not the question. Rather is, how do we raise them to leadership? How do we magnify their voices? How do we follow the example of John the Baptist and say, I must become lesser? They must become greater. because Jesus has clearly, bluntly stated that God is embodied, manifested, made present in those that our culture has oppressed and set aside.

And if we only seek to serve them, minister to them, help them, then we're only continuing to assume that we're the ones of greater status and perpetuating the hierarchical relationship that already exists.

[22 : 55] No, no, no, no. Jesus says, welcome them. Not reject. Hopefully, dear God, that much is obvious. But the opposite of reject is not just treat as less than, but nicer.

The opposite of reject is to welcome, to give them the preferred spot, not just a seat at the table, put them in charge of the table. So, clue number one, we no longer offer healing to our neighborhoods and our cities.

Clue number two is when what is clear becomes hidden and we're too afraid to ask. Clue number three is that when those of other status are rejected instead of welcome.

Clue number four, finally, is when we attempt to claim exclusive rights on Jesus. verse 49, Master, says John, we saw someone driving out demons in your name and we tried to stop him because he is not one of us.

Jesus replies, do not stop him for whoever is not against you is for you. Now, note the incredible, hilarious irony of this passage.

[24 : 12] Mere moments before, the disciples have failed to do the very thing that they're offended that somebody else is doing, casting out a demon.

The disciples could not, were not able to help the father and the child, could not cast out the demon, could not bring healing to this family. And we're not actually told why, but could it be it's because the disciples were so focused on who and who was not allowed to bring healing and to the world, that they impaired their own ability to bring healing into the world?

Could it be that because they were so obsessed with, oh no, there's somebody who's not one of us and they're healing demons, oh by the way, we're not able to heal demons, but at least we're not one of them. Is that what actually prevented them?

Friends, we must not become more fixated on whether the right people are bringing healing into the world than on whether or not healing is actually happening.

We saw someone else driving out demons, John's complaint, should be caused not for condemnation, but celebration. Don't try to stop them, join them.

[25 : 24] And you can fill out that driving out demons with first century language with all sorts of things. We saw somebody healing systemic oppression. We saw someone dismantling the criminal justice system.

We saw someone removing patriarchy. We saw someone making the world more accessible. We saw someone eradicating poverty. We saw someone repairing creation, and we stopped them because they weren't one of us.

Whenever you hear cries of, they're not one of us, then you know the focus is wrong. Or cries of, they're doing it the wrong way. That's another popular one.

It's one that Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. talked about in his letter from a Birmingham jail when he talked about the white moderate. Listen to this. Dr. King writes, I must confess that over the past few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate.

I have reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block and his stride toward freedom isn't the white citizen's counselor or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate who is more devoted to order than to justice, who prefers a negative peace, which is the absence of tension, to a positive peace, which is the presence of justice.

[26 : 37] Who constantly says, I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action. Who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man's freedom.

Who lives by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a quote-unquote more convenient season. person. That white moderate energy is the same energy behind John's statement.

We try to stop him because he's not one of us. You're doing it wrong. You're doing it the wrong way. You're not one of us. It's the same thing, friends. I'll say it again.

We must not become more fixated on whether the right people are bringing healing into the world the right way than on whether or not the healing is actually happening. And Christians love to tell you who's in and who's out, who's got it right and who's got it wrong.

Evangelical Christians have reinvented cancel culture, slapping warnings on books that had objectionable material, like referencing the existence of sex, canceling speaking engagements and contracts with writers and preachers and prophets who suggested that God's love may be more inclusive and expansive than we've ever been told before.

[27 : 51] And, you know, progressive Christians are just as capable of fixating on being associated with the right people and never rubbing elbows with anyone whose views could be possibly called objectionable or problematic.

And that's not to say that we don't object to objectionable views. We must, as D.L. Mayfield said. It's not cancel culture. It's I no longer want to be under the leadership of or give my money, time, attention to unhealthy people who perpetuate systems of abuse culture.

Yeah, I'll be a part of that. But Jesus is right. If they're not against you, then let's assume the best of them, that they're for you. And if they're bringing healing and justice into the world, don't stop them.

Join them. And if they are against you, you are under no obligation to keep receiving their abuse.

As Pastor Matt Nightingale likes to say, you don't have to worship where you're not wanted.

as Jesus said, knock the dust off of your feet and move on. But also, don't assume that just because you disagree with somebody, that that somebody is now ineligible for Jesus to work in their lives or for Jesus to work through their lives.

[29 : 10] God has a long, long history of working through the most problematic, objectionable, narrow-minded, bigoted, nationalistic, violent people in order to somehow birth something good and beautiful into the world.

We thank God that Jesus did not turn his back on his disciples merely because they failed him at almost every turn. The only reason I can preach this sermon, the only reason that we have Luke chapter 9 today, is because the disciples made all four mistakes that I've just preached on.

They failed to bring healing. They failed to understand what is clear. They assumed children and non-Jews were less than. They tried to keep Jesus to themselves and Jesus kept offering his healing presence to this group of dunces.

The takeaway of this sermon cannot be thank God that I am not like them, but rather we confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed by what we have done, by what we have left undone.

Friends, there is much work left undone. So let's roll up our sleeves, submit to the Holy Spirit and ask her to give us the grace to join the healing love of Jesus.

[30 : 38] Amen. Amen. intimated to end ing ?

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