
‘Limping between Two Different Opinions’: 1 Kings 18:21 and the Idolatry of Christian Nationalism

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Few biblical narratives stage a public theological demonstration as deliberately as the Carmel episode (1 Kgs 18:17–46), which addresses what happens when YHWH’s covenant people attempt to maintain competing loyalties—figuratively “limping between two different opinions” (1 Kgs 18:21) rather than rendering exclusive allegiance to him.¹ More than a mere spectacle of divine miracle, Elijah’s clash with the prophets of Baal is a tightly constructed polemic in which Israel’s crisis—drought, famine, political blame—is framed as a crisis of covenant loyalty, and the question of divine agency is pressed to an unambiguous decision. Baal’s extended silence is juxtaposed with YHWH’s immediate response, eliciting the people’s climactic confession, “The LORD [YHWH], he is God” (1 Kgs 18:39). The episode therefore belongs to a recognizable biblical pattern in which God discloses God’s self in unambiguous ways so that it becomes unmistakably clear that God is operative in the world and that remarkable outcomes cannot be attributed to human agency alone.

This article argues that the Carmel confrontation exposes syncretism—the mixing of religions²—as a covenant crisis, and that the logic of Elijah’s charge provides a penetrating framework for evaluating a modern form of religious syncretism: Christian nationalism. In contemporary American contexts, “limping” frequently involves conflating national identity with Christian identity, subordinating the ethics and mission of the gospel to the priorities, fears, and imagined sacred destiny of the nation.³

1. Bible quotations are from the English Standard Version (ESV) unless otherwise noted. The author’s references to the tetragrammaton (“YHWH”), translated “the LORD” in the ESV, are intended to specify the covenant God of Israel.

2. “Syncretism is a tricky term. Its main difficulty is that it is used with both an objective and a subjective meaning. The basic objective meaning refers neutrally and descriptively to the mixing of religions. The subjective meaning includes an evaluation of such intermingling from the point of view of one of the religions involved.” André Droogers, “Syncretism: The Problem of Definition, the Definition of the Problem,” in *Dialogue and Syncretism: An Interdisciplinary Approach*, ed. Jerald D. Gort et al. (Eerdmans, 1989), 7.

3. “For too long, many American Christians have failed to distinguish their identities as Americans and their identities as Christians. Sometimes, we have unwittingly prioritized our American identity over our Christian one. . . . We have preferred what will benefit the United States over what will build the kingdom of God. This is idolatry, and we must repent.” Michael W. Austin, *American Christian*

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Like Israel’s attempted coordination of Baal and YHWH, Christian nationalism is idolatrous insofar as it fuses devotion to God with devotion to the nation.⁴ The contemporary analogy is not that modern politics equals Baal, but that the logical dynamics of syncretism persist. As Whitehead and Perry explain, “Christian nationalism is a lens through which all Americans experience and interpret the social world, and the rejection or embrace of it motivates them toward very different ends.”⁵ Under this framework, religious language and symbols persist, while rival commitments become determinative for identity, moral imagination, and communal loyalties.

This discussion includes a close reading of 1 Kings 18 within the Elijah cycle (1 Kgs 17–19) while giving particular attention to the chapter’s narrative structure, “limping” lexical signal (18:21, 26), and polemical use of geography and elemental motifs (drought, water, fire, rain). The aim is to demonstrate how the text constructs a public theological verdict against compromised covenant allegiance and, by analogy, how that verdict speaks to contemporary Christian nationalism as a form of idolatrous syncretism. The Carmel episode, then, is a diagnostic

Nationalism: Neither American nor Christian (Eerdmans, 2024), 35.

4. “Christian nationalism leads to the exaltation of the nation over God, of our obligations to our fellow Americans over the broader obligations of Christian ethics. It not only worships power, but at times it worships the nation itself as a god. This is idolatry. This is not the way of Jesus.” Austin, *American Christian Nationalism*, 29.

5. Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry, *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States* (Oxford University Press, 2022), 18.

prism, providing recurring features of idolatrous compromise—misdiagnosis of trouble, divided fealty, ritualized performance, and coerced public verdict—that can illuminate contemporary ecclesial entanglements without collapsing the ancient narrative into modern contexts.

Background: The onset of public syncretism in Israel

According to 1 Kings 16:30, Ahab is worse than all the kings who precede him and does more to provoke YHWH's anger than his predecessors. The narrative stages Ahab's evil as an intensification of the Jeroboam paradigm; the king not only "walk[s] in the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat," but he marries Jezebel, a princess of Phoenicia, erects an altar for Baal, and makes an Asherah (16:31–32). Phoenicia lay just north of Israel along the Mediterranean coast, a narrow strip of land associated with cities such as Tyre and Sidon. Baal was associated with rain in some ANE cultures, and Asherah, goddess of the earth, was portrayed as his wife, receiving the rain he brought.⁶ Ahab's marriage to the daughter of a Sidonian king, then, becomes a conduit for the propagation and normalization of foreign cult practices in Israel, as the king takes decisive steps to facilitate worship of the Phoenician deities in Israel.

In 1 Kings 17:1–5, Elijah confronts the king and announces that there will be no rain in Israel for a period of years as a consequence of Ahab's covenant disloyalty, then departs at YHWH's direction. Within broader ANE religious practice, festivals and rites were sometimes intended to provoke Baal's response.⁷ In this context, the prolonged drought is a polemical challenge to his supposed power. The critique is heightened by Elijah's claim that YHWH governs the very domain Baal is believed to control and that Israel's welfare lies with YHWH rather than the Baal cult: "As the LORD, the God of Israel, lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word" (17:1).⁸

After confronting Ahab, Elijah is told to hide, and the narrative of 1 Kings 17 depicts YHWH's providential care for the prophet—first by ravens, then by a widow at Zarephath, and finally through

6. "Baal is god of the storm and heavens, and is responsible for bringing rain so that the natural world may flourish at the onset of the rainy season in the land of Israel in late September or early October." Marvin A. Sweeney, *I & II Kings*, OTL (Westminster John Knox, 2013), 226. "To the Ugaritians, Baal was supremely the 'rain god.'" James R. Battenfield, "YHWH's Refutation of the Baal Myth through the Actions of Elijah and Elisha," in *Israel's Apostasy and Restoration: Essays in Honor of Roland K. Harrison*, ed. Avraham Gileadi (Baker Book House, 1988), 21.

7. Mordechai Cogan, *1 Kings*, vol. 10 of *AB* (Doubleday, 2001), 440–441.

8. As Battenfield notes, in this episode, "YHWH challenges not only the power but even the existence of Baal in the hearts of the people of the Northern Kingdom. To withhold rain is to render Baal unable to perform his alleged role as the great storm-god of Semitic lore." Battenfield, "YHWH's Refutation of the Baal Myth through the Actions of Elijah and Elisha," 20.

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the restoration of the widow's son. These episodes keep the reader's attention fixed on YHWH's sovereign agency, as the God who will answer publicly on Mount Carmel first demonstrates his power over scarcity and death in private venues. The result is a narrative frame in which the Carmel contest is not an isolated marvel but a public demonstration of a divine agency already operative throughout the Elijah cycle.

This context highlights the theological point of the drought; it is not merely a comparative religious study. In Kings, communal crisis is often correlated with covenant infidelity. Consequently, Israel's drought and attendant famine in the Elijah cycle result from public, institutionalized, syncretic compromise rather than from random natural misfortune. This background helps stage the public challenge at Carmel as a question of deific authority and cultic allegiance, a contest to determine whether YHWH or Baal governs the community's life.

Private confrontation: The root of Israel's trouble (18:1–19)

In the third year, when the famine in Samaria is severe, Elijah again appears to Ahab at YHWH's direction (18:1–2), and the king instantly blames the prophet for Israel's drought, saying, "Is it you, you troubler of Israel?" (18:17). The Hebrew verb translated "troubler" (רָעַע) refers to stirring up or causing a disturbance.⁹ In response, Elijah inverts and amplifies the accusation: "I have not troubled Israel, but you have, and your father's house, because you have abandoned the commandments of the LORD and followed the Baals" (18:18). This exchange illustrates a significant logic of blame in the narrative: Ahab treats Elijah's prophetic word in 17:1 as the cause of the crisis ("neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word," hence famine), but Elijah emphasizes Ahab's lack of covenant loyalty as the provocation for the divine judgment that brings national misery, of which Elijah's prophecy is merely a harbinger.

To prove that lack of reverence for YHWH is at the heart of Israel's problems, Elijah challenges Ahab: "Now therefore send and gather all Israel to me at Mount Carmel, and the 450 prophets

9. BDB, 747.

of Baal and the 400 prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel's table" (18:19).¹⁰ Mount Carmel is a fertile, heavily forested range spanning 15-20 miles along the Mediterranean coast (cf. Isa 35:2; Amos 1:2) that typically receives more precipitation than surrounding areas.¹¹ Moreover, the site has cultic significance in Kings. According to John A. Beck, "The lushness of the slopes and its prominent stature combined to give Mount Carmel sacred status.... [F]or Jezebel and her Phoenician family, Mount Carmel was no ordinary worship site but an important Baal sanctuary."¹²

Elijah strategically challenges the prophets of Baal and Asherah on their own hallowed ground in a border zone between ancient Israel and Phoenicia, an especially visible theater for a verdict that neither side can ignore.¹³ This setting is indicative of the true genesis of Israel's trouble. The root problem is not a private spirituality; it is a royally supported prophetic establishment entrenched among YHWH's covenant people, with 850 cultic personnel sustained by the court. The text thereby positions the Carmel event as a dispute about public religion, not merely individual belief.

Public challenge: The call to stop "limping" (18:20–24)

Ahab accepts Elijah's invitation and gathers the people and the prophets on the mountain (18:20). The prophet uses the occasion to crystallize the covenantal conflict, calling the audience to a concrete decision: "How long will you go limping between two different opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him" (18:21). The Hebrew verb rendered "go limping" (from פָּסָה, *pāsah*) suggests labored oscillation—moving in one direction for a time and then laboring back in the other.¹⁴ The issue in Israel is not mere indecision or uncertainty; it is compromised allegiance and unwillingness to walk steadily in covenant fidelity. The people are attempting to do antithetical things, offering attenuated commitment in one direction and then in the other. "Limping" describes this spiritual posture, in which allegiance to YHWH is nominally affirmed, but practical identity and moral priorities are compromised by rival commitments.

The people do not respond to Elijah's charge, signaling their lack of fidelity and indecision (18:21b). In the narrative, Israel is so enmeshed in Baal worship that the people are reluctant to forsake it, even to remain faithful to the covenant with YHWH. Their silence, then, is a palpable sign of syncretism at work: the refusal to abandon YHWH altogether combined with the refusal to relinquish rival cultic commitments. Israel is trying to serve

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Syncretism is enabled by interpretive and practical ambiguity that allows rival loyalties to remain untested. Considering the people's silence, Elijah details the challenge: he will stand alone as a true prophet of YHWH against the 450 prophets of Baal (18:22).¹⁵ Although 18:19 mentions 400 prophets of Asherah, the narrative foregrounds Baal's prophets in the fire test. Each side will prepare a bull without lighting a fire; the prophets will call upon Baal, and Elijah will call upon YHWH, and "The god who answers by fire, he is God" (18:24). Elijah's terms do not countenance a compromise; Israel cannot feign covenant loyalty while holding YHWH as only one of several commitments. According to Paul R. House, "Elijah wants to eliminate Baal from consideration whenever Israel decides theological matters."¹⁶ Consequently, this trial, designed to culminate in an outcome so public and unambiguous that Israel can no longer sustain its "limping" posture, is designed to bring unequivocal closure. The people assent, affirming, "It is well spoken" (18:24).

Decisive victory: Baal's silence and YHWH's answer (18:25–46)

Elijah allows the prophets of Baal to go first: "Then Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, 'Choose for yourselves one bull and prepare it first, for you are many, and call upon the name of your god, but put no fire to it'" (18:25). They prepare their offering, call out to Baal, and dance around the altar from morning until noon, yet

10. The 400 prophets of Asherah are referred to only in this verse in MT (LXX does mention them in v. 22).

11. Sweeney, *I & II Kings*, 227; John A. Beck, "Geography as Irony: The Narrative-Geographical Shaping of Elijah's Duel with the Prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18)," *SJOT* 17 (2003): 297–298.

12. Beck, "Geography as Irony," 298–299.

13. "What better place to decide who is God, what prophets tell the truth, and what leaders benefit or harm the people?" Paul R. House, *1, 2 Kings*, NAC 8 (Broadman & Holman, 2003), 218.

14. BDB, 820.

15. According to Cogan, "Elijah's singular campaign against Baal, despite the monarchic reign of terror, marked him off as the era's unequaled man of God." Cogan, *1 Kings*, 440.

16. House, *1, 2 Kings*, 219.

“there was no voice, and no one answered. And they limped around the altar that they had made” (18:26). The narrative irony here is deliberate and rhetorically potent: Israel “limps” (from פָּסָה, *pāsah*) between YHWH and Baal (18:21), and Baal’s prophets now “limp” (also from פָּסָה, *pāsah*) around an altar that yields only silence.

Elijah mocks the prophets and tells them to cry louder since Baal may be musing, relieving himself, journeying, or asleep (18:27). These sarcastic remarks suggest that a deity who is distractible, absent, or unaware is, by definition, undeserving as an object of worship.¹⁷ In the logic of Kings, Baal’s non-responsiveness exposes both Baal and the flawed religious imagination that sustains devotion to him. Yet the prophets continue crying out until evening, cutting themselves, and mingling their blood (18:28-29a). Still, “there was no voice. No one answered; no one paid attention” (18:29b).

At the time of this confrontation, Baal worship is vibrant and well-resourced in Israel, while the altar of YHWH lies in disrepair—a sign of Israel’s compromised commitment. Elijah, intending to prove that YHWH is the one true God, repairs the altar, arranges the wood, and prepares his offering (18:30-33a). The use of twelve stones “according to the number of the tribes” in v. 31 emphasizes that the trial concerns Israel’s identity and unity as YHWH’s covenant people. Elijah dramatizes the revival he hopes to bring about in Israel, then has the offering and the wood doused with water thrice until the trench around the altar is filled (18:33b-35). Drenching the offering is the opposite of ordinary fire-making and forecloses any suspicion that Elijah is engineering the result: if fire comes, it can only be from YHWH.¹⁸

At the time of the evening sacrifice, Elijah prays that Israel will truly recognize YHWH as God and Elijah as his servant (18:36). The prophet is concerned about covenantal reorientation; an answered prayer would “turn their hearts back,” exposing syncretism and enabling repentance (18:37). In a result that surpasses anything the prophets of Baal are even attempting, the fire of YHWH then falls and consumes not only the offering but also the wood, stones, dust, and water, intensifying the decisiveness of the verdict (18:38). When the audience sees the fiery response, the people fall on their faces and confess, “The LORD, he is God; the LORD, he is God” (18:39). While the people’s prior silence signals compromised commitment, their confession now marks the narrative’s climax, as Israel is pressed beyond “limping” into public recognition of YHWH’s exclusive claim.

YHWH’s response is conclusive: “A defeat on this sacred ground was a more powerful defeat than one that would have occurred on more neutral ground. If Baal is unable to prove himself on this sacred ground, then where could his power be

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demonstrated?”¹⁹ When the people see YHWH answer with fire, they seize the prophets of Baal at Elijah’s direction and lead them to slaughter (18:39-40), “renewing their commitment to follow Yawheh as God of Israel.”²⁰ In this way, syncretism in Israel is not merely regretted; it is also judged and removed. Elijah then announces the sound of rain to Ahab, so that the God who answers by fire is also the God who restores rain as the covenantal response to Israel’s confession, thereby completing the polemic against Baal, the supposed rain god (18:41-45).²¹ The rain that falls here evinces YHWH’s “absolutely sovereignty over nature and human affairs.”²² As Peter J. Leithart explains, “At evening, a new day begins, the day of Yahweh.”²³

The Carmel narrative demonstrates that Israel’s troubles are not merely circumstantial; they are covenantal, linked to compromised commitment. Over and over in Israel’s Scriptures, God delivers the people, plainly communicates God’s expectations, and requires covenant loyalty. Repeatedly, they compromise, limping between two opinions—refusing to give up on YHWH completely while clinging to other cultic commitments, thereby creating a religion in which YHWH is only part of one’s devotion rather than the whole. Such syncretism involves YHWH in a religion of the worshipers’ own making. This is a species of idolatry because it limits YHWH’s exclusive claim (Exod 20:2-6; Deut 5:6-10). Elijah’s “limping” imagery and call to undivided allegiance in the narrative, then, are inevitable expressions of covenant logic; divided worship is incompatible with the covenant name and claim of YHWH.

17. Alan J. Hauser and Russell Gregory, *From Carmel to Horeb: Elijah in Crisis*, JSOTSupp 85 (Almond Press, 1990), 44.

18. “For the water poured on the altar only enhances the miracle of God, affirms the credibility of his claims, and sets the stage for the abundance of fresh water about to rain down on the land as the story comes to a close.” Beck, “Geography as Irony,” 301.

19. Beck, “Geography as Irony,” 299.

20. Peter J. Leithart, *1 and 2 Kings*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Brazos Press, 2006), 136.

21. “[T]he long-sought reprieve from the drought promised by YHWH in the opening verse materialized once YHWH’s supremacy had been manifested and acknowledged on Mount Carmel, and Israel declared its undivided loyalty to YHWH.” Cogan, *1 Kings*, 446.

22. House, *1, 2 Kings*, 221.

23. Leithart, *1 and 2 Kings*, 135.

Contemporary implications: Modern Christian nationalism as syncretic “limping”

Christian nationalism, in which many claim to honor God while tacitly placing national identity, interests, and power in a determinative position—consequently holding inconsistent “opinions” in tension—is a modern analog to the syncretism Elijah critiques in 1 Kings 18. Ancient Israel’s socio-political standing as a covenant people under divine kingship is not synonymous with the modern nation-state, so the Carmel narrative cannot be directly transposed onto contemporary circumstances. Moreover, the rhetoric of judgment in Kings belongs to its own canonical and historical setting and is not directly transferable to modern concerns. However, the narrative pattern of “limping” between two commitments is analogous, even accounting for differences in the specific actors, institutions, or outcomes. When viewed this way, the Carmel pericope illustrates a recurring theological problem—*syncretism masked as fidelity*—and invites later communities to examine whether their professed allegiance to God is compromised by rival sources of trust, identity, or power.

While the precise contours of Christian nationalism are debated, Whitehead and Perry describe it as “a commitment to a vision of American civic life and polity as closely intertwined with an identitarian, politically conservative strain of Christianity.”²⁴ Legal scholar Caroline Mala Corbin’s description similarly strikes at the heart of the syncretic concern addressed here: “Christian nationalism posits that the United States has always been, and should always remain, a Christian nation in both its culture and government. Its defining characteristic is that religious identity and national identity overlap.”²⁵

The Carmel narrative is not only a contest of divine power; it is also a contest over how God’s people interpret their crises and order their loyalties. Ahab’s accusation—“troubler of Israel”—exemplifies a logic of blame that misidentifies the source of national distress (18:17). Elijah’s reply relocates the genesis of “trouble” at the level of covenant fidelity: the crisis is symptomatic of abandoning YHWH’s commandments and “follow[ing] the Baals” (18:18). This diagnostic reversal supplies an instructive parallel for the present discussion. Contemporary Christian nationalist discourse often involves a similar misdiagnosis, primarily attributing social and ecclesial problems to external enemies or cultural loss rather than to the theological problems of compromised allegiance and distorted witness.²⁶ Yet Elijah’s retort insists that Israel’s deepest

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crisis is covenantal, suggesting that covenant communities should consider their own rival allegiances rather than focus exclusively on who or what opposes them.

Elijah’s charge—“How long will you go limping between two different opinions?” (18:21)—names the syncretistic, divided allegiance that sustains Israel’s misdiagnosis. The narrative does not portray Israel as atheistic or ignorant but as unwilling to choose, clinging to YHWH while refusing to relinquish competing commitments. The “limping” metaphor, satirically echoed in the prophets’ “limping” around the altar (18:26), synthesizes the divided allegiance that begets performative ritual with no divine response.

In this light, Christian nationalism can be construed as a modern form of syncretism with an analogous logic, where political opinions, national commitments, and civic anxieties are packaged in biblical language and treated as “faith.” The result is a fusion in which nominal Christian confession remains while national identity becomes determinative for moral priorities and communal allegiances. “Limping” then follows from conflating national identity with Christian identity and subordinating the gospel’s ethics and mission to the nation’s priorities, fears, and imagined sacred destiny. When these antithetical devotions

24. Whitehead and Perry, *Taking America Back for God*, xxi.

25. Caroline Mala Corbin, “Christian Legislative Prayers and Christian Nationalism,” *Washington & Lee Law Review* 76 (2019): 458.

26. “When a supposed ‘Christian nationalism’ goes hand in hand with a culture that glorifies violence, and the means of violence, at whatever level; where the churches are so divided that they have no collective witness with which to speak the truth to the powers in question; where people ignore the regular biblical insistence on the love of enemies, and the goal of a single multi-ethnic worshipping community, and prefer de facto ethnically based separate assemblies; where truth ceases to matter, either because it is deconstructed into ‘my truth’ and ‘your truth’ or because political leaders so obviously tell

lies—then the gospel, the *euangelion*, is being denied, irrespective of how many people within ‘the system’ think of themselves as *evangelisch* or ‘evangelical.’” N. T. Wright and Michael F. Bird, *Jesus and the Powers: Christian Political Witness in an Age of Totalitarian Terror and Dysfunctional Democracies* (Zondervan Reflective, 2024), 71.

devolve into glorification of violence,²⁷ disregard for enemy-love,²⁸ ethnically segregated social and ecclesial life,²⁹ and contempt for truth, then the gospel is effectively denied.³⁰

The most consequential problems posed by Christian nationalism concern communal formation rather than personal belief. What the church publicly performs, sanctions, and honors as “Christian” shapes whether it remains a community ordered by the gospel or becomes a community afflicted with rival ends. Austin’s diagnosis aptly distills the consequences of fusing ecclesial and national identities: “American Christian nationalism is harmful to the church and our life together as followers of Jesus. It is corrosive to our spiritual lives and undermines our witness as ambassadors for Christ. It can lead to a dangerous idolatry that puts our American citizenship above our citizenship in the kingdom of God. It also hinders us from loving our neighbor as ourselves.”³¹

Carmel illuminates why syncretism should not be treated as a private eccentricity. Elijah stages the confrontation on public, symbolically charged “sacred ground” and forces a communal

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verdict. His trial’s design, including the water-drenching, demands an unambiguous contest of rival claims so that unexamined, blended loyalties are finally resolved. Similarly, the critique of Christian nationalism should be pursued on public “sacred ground,” not only at the level of abstract ideas but in ecclesial spaces, where political myths are rehearsed with religious affect, and the church’s witness is absorbed into partisan narratives of power, purity, and protection.

The narrative’s endpoint underscores the ecclesial stakes. Israel’s penitent confession—“The LORD, he is God” (18:39)—is a public declaration of reordered allegiance prompted by YHWH’s self-disclosure. Similarly, repentance from Christian nationalism cannot be sustained by denunciation alone; it requires practices and forms of ecclesial life that publicly re-center Christian identity in Christ’s lordship and the gospel’s moral demands. Carmel’s public verdict thus speaks to communal witness: whether the covenant people can speak collectively and faithfully about who God is and what God requires, or whether rival commitments will fracture the church’s moral coherence.

Finally, the episode suggests that the church’s unity is properly secured by exclusive allegiance to God rather than uniform political identity. In the narrative, Israel’s “limping” posture produces paralysis and silence (18:21b); clarity of allegiance produces confession (18:39) and a communal response with public consequences (18:40). The implication for contemporary contexts is that Christian nationalism is not merely a political error; it is an ecclesial deformation, an alternative identity project that competes with Christian identity and reorders the church’s moral priorities.³²

27. “When pastors publicly applaud right-wing militias like the Proud Boys, on the eve of the attack on the Capitol, they are not just participating in Christian nationalism. They are inflaming right-wing religious/insurrectionist violence. We have witnessed in our time the movement of some beyond Christian ‘culture wars’ to actual Christian holy violence.” David P. Gushee, *Defending Democracy from Its Christian Enemies* (Eerdmans, 2023), 140.

28. “Christian nationalism all too often prioritizes power, prestige, and prosperity over service. Rather than uniting us in working together to help one another, it divides us. It seeks power, not to serve those who are in need but to serve oneself, asking, ‘Who is enough “like me” that I feel like serving them?’” Austin, *American Christian Nationalism*, 25.

29. “The belief that America is lost and needs to be reclaimed by Christians is perhaps best conceptualized as Christian nationalism. This worldview stakes out the claim that the United States has been and should again be a Christian nation, sanctioned by God for Christians to work in the interests of Christians. In this conception, there is no daylight between church and state—it therefore tends to carry with it a host of exclusionary attitudes that run along religious as well as racial lines (though it should be noted that Christian nationalism is not nearly limited to whites, nor Republicans.” Anand Edward Sokhey and Paul A. Djupe, “Introduction: Deliver Us from Evil,” in *Trump, White Evangelical Christians, and American Politics: Change and Continuity*, eds. Anand Edward Sokhey and Paul A. Djupe (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2024), 4–5. “White evangelicals exhibit the hallmarks of group threat theory, where the relative size of out-groups causes members of an in-group to believe their own position is under attack, and they therefore develop negative attitudes toward out-groups. This has caused them to embrace nationalist ideologies, which create a clear ‘us versus them’ outlook on the world, even among fellow American citizens. ‘Christian nationalism’ therefore leads its adherents to view non-white, non-Christian groups as outsiders to what they see as the ‘true’ America.” Eric L. McDaniel, Sarah Heise, and Abraham Barranca, “In God’s Image: White Evangelical Protestants and Threats to White Masculinity,” in *Trump, White Evangelical Christians, and American Politics*, 184. “Christian nationalism also lends itself to feelings of ethnic superiority and promotes interracial tensions especially when Christianity is aligned with ‘whiteness.’” Wright and Bird, *Jesus and the Powers*, 135.

30. Wright and Bird, *Jesus and the Powers*, 71.

31. Austin, *American Christian Nationalism*, 6–7.

32. “Christian nationalists see it as their job to take America back for God and for ‘real’ Americans—the community with which they identify themselves. Christian nationalists appear to trade the community of the one universal church and its life for the community of the nation, sanctifying and blessing a particular cultural and political vision of America. This explains why for some people the performance of Christian religiosity and Christian cultural trappings become boundary markers in judging who is or is not a real American.” Joel Looper, *Another Gospel: Christian Nationalism and the Crisis of Evangelical Identity* (Eerdmans, 2024), 13.

When read diagnostically, Carmel presses a practical ecclesial question: whether the church will maintain a blended identity in which Christian confession is retained alongside a functionally greater national identity, or whether it will embrace expressions and practices that render its primary allegiance to Christ publicly intelligible and communally binding.

The primary arena in which the church resists syncretism is not the political sphere but its own practices of worship, catechesis, and communal identity. Rather than assuming a shared Christian moral imagination, communities should teach explicitly how allegiance to Christ reorders political hopes, fears, and identities. Regular, theologically rich confession of faith—particularly language that names God's exclusive sovereignty and rejects ostensible contenders—forms communities whose primary loyalty is not to nation, ethnicity, or ideology but to the crucified and risen Christ. Likewise, liturgical practices of confession and lament can function as disciplined resistance to self-justifying national myths, training communities to tell the truth about their histories and complicities before God. Such practices do not withdraw the church from public life; they reconfigure the church's presence in it. By locating ultimate judgment and vindication in God rather than in national success, the church is freed to participate in political life without absolutizing it. The result is a community capable of speaking truthfully about the nation without worshiping it, praying for rulers without confusing them with saviors, and seeking the common good without surrendering its first love.

Conclusion: Carmel as a diagnostic for modern syncretism

When applied to Christian nationalism by analogy, Elijah's question becomes a theological diagnostic for modern syncretism: How long will the church attempt to fuse allegiance to Christ with allegiance to their nation-states in ways that blunt the gospel's demands and redirect the church's witness? The problem is not civic responsibility as such, but idolatrous confusion of kingdoms that leads to prioritizing American identity over Christian identity, idolizing the courage of the soldier over the courage of the martyr, privileging investments over immigrants, and supporting "evil that good may come" (cf. Rom 3:8)—precisely the kind of divided loyalty Elijah identifies as "limping."

The church's ultimate loyalty belongs to the crucified and risen Christ rather than any politician, party, or national myth. Because the gospel is constituted by Christ's saving work, political identities should not be permitted to function as quasi-redemptive narratives that claim the church's imagination and devotion. Carmel thus presses the same crystallizing challenge upon modern covenant communities: if YHWH is God, follow him—publicly and without the labored oscillation of divided allegiance!

By locating ultimate judgment and vindication in God rather than in national success, the church is freed to participate in political life without absolutizing it. The result is a community capable of speaking truthfully about the nation without worshiping it, praying for rulers without confusing them with saviors, and seeking the common good without surrendering its first love.
