
The Doctrine of Election and Christian Nationalism: A Trinitarian Response

Noah Dodd

*Pastor, St. Paul Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Pensacola, Florida*

Anthony D. Smith notes that “it is usual to see in nationalism a modern, secular ideology that replaces the religious systems found in premodern, traditional societies.”¹ Considering this, Christian nationalism may seem to be an oxymoron. However, the ends which nationalisms seek occasionally run parallel to religion. Like religion, nationalisms seek to establish a “sacred communion” apart from any institutions outside itself. Thus, various forms of nationalism have drawn upon religious concepts to achieve this goal.²

One source that has been particularly influential is the theological doctrine of election. Many nationalist and pre-nationalist movements have invoked a belief in divine chosenness as a form of legitimation for their movement.³ The belief in one’s election by God “legitimizes present needs and concerns by reference to a heroic collective past that inspires emulation.”⁴ Indeed, David Morrison corroborates this claim, observing that “we continually encounter the nationalist self-image as one of an elect nation, a unique people with a particular history and destiny, the successor to older religious beliefs in a chosen people.”⁵

This is true of Christian nationalism as well. Christian nationalist thinkers have drawn upon an understanding of election with roots in the colonial origins of the United States. The Puritan colonizers believed they possessed a unique relationship with the Creator; this saturated their worldview. This understanding of election and its implications emerged out of their roots in Reformed Theology and contains aspects of both communal and individual election.

The theology of election is rooted in a distinct Calvinist understanding of double predestination blended with an understanding of the United States being a chosen nation.⁶ It relies

Many nationalist and pre-nationalist movements have invoked a belief in divine chosenness as a form of legitimation for their movement. The belief in one’s election by God “legitimizes present needs and concerns by reference to a heroic collective past that inspires emulation.”

upon the belief that God has created individuals for two distinct ends. To some, God has predestined mercy and to the rest God has determined punishment. This belief has been used to support an ideology which privileges “Christian” individuals and values over others, and has led to the justification of violence, subjugation, and coercion in the name of God to further nationalist aspirations.

Though this theology is not synonymous with Calvin—or Calvinism—modern Christian nationalism and its ideological predecessors have drawn upon an understanding of Calvin’s doctrine and co-opted it as a means to legitimate and achieve political ends. Simply returning to Calvin’s theology is insufficient, however, to address the issue. Calvin’s doctrine of double predestination creates a binary between the elect and rejected, giving rise to a bifurcated theological anthropology which is insufficient on both biblical and theological grounds. This theological anthropology has been used to perpetuate inequalities and justify violence against and oppression toward those believed to be reprobate. This is not only harmful, it is also inconsistent with the revelation of God in the economy of salvation—God’s saving work in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit—and the testimony of scripture. For this reason, a different approach is necessary.

This article articulates an approach to election which is trinitarian in form; looking to the revelation of God in the world

Introduction (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1983), 256.

1. Anthony D. Smith, *Chosen Peoples: Sacred Sources of National Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 9.

2. Smith, *Chosen Peoples*, 4. Smith observes “nationalist belief-system draws much of its content from key elements of traditional religions, duly sifted and reinterpreted.” Smith, *Chosen Peoples*, 2.

3. See Smith, *Chosen Peoples*, chapters 3–4 for examples of various iterations of nationalism which have drawn upon the idea of divine chosenness.

4. Smith, *Chosen Peoples*, 49.

5. David Morrison, *The Theologies of American Christian Nationalism* (PhD Dissertation, Princeton Theological Seminary, 2024), 75.

6. William C. Placher, *A History of Christian Theology: An*

for the sake of humanity in Christ through the Spirit as the foundation for a doctrine of election. Additionally, it explores the political and ethical implications of such a doctrine. To do so, it behooves us to examine specific examples of how the doctrine of election has been wielded by proponents of Christian nationalism.

A genealogy of Christian nationalism and the influence of the doctrine of election

Puritan colonies

Puritanism emerged in England in the sixteenth century as an expression of Reformed Theology in response to a perceived moral decay of the Church. Inspired by generations of persecution on behalf of Catholics and Anglicans within England, many Puritans left Europe for America with hopes of creating a haven where they were free to exercise their religious beliefs.⁷

The Calvinist belief in their election combined with the persecution they endured made the identification with the Patriarchs of the Hebrew Bible seem intuitive.⁸ Just as God delivered the Israelites across the Red Sea free from Pharaoh's oppression, so God saved the Puritans from tyranny across the Atlantic Ocean to a new promised land.⁹

While Puritanism did not exercise religious hegemony over colonial America, what differentiated it from other Christian practice is summarized well by William Placher: "[Other denominations] generally sought to preserve the religious traditions of the 'old country.' The Puritans of New England consciously sought to make something new."¹⁰ Their colonial ambitions were intertwined with their faith. Their society was to be an example to the world. Puritan colonial settlers viewed themselves as the inheritors of God's covenant together with the people of Israel and saw their enterprise as a continuation of God's electing purpose.

This vision is articulated in the words of John Winthrop in his *A Model of Christian Charity*. The "city upon a hill" motif inspired by Jesus' words in Matthew 5 have come to serve as a creedal statement in the civic religion of the United States. Winthrop writes, "The Lord will be our God, and delight to dwell among us, as His own people, and will command a blessing upon us in all our ways... He shall make us a praise and glory that men shall say of succeeding plantations, 'may the Lord make it like that of New England.' For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us."¹¹

In the theological worldview of the Puritans, it was their divinely appointed destiny to become that "city upon a hill"; to

In the theological worldview of the Puritans, it was their divinely appointed destiny to become that "city upon a hill"; to create a society based on their beliefs. Their understanding of scripture shaped their theological anthropology, thus shaping how they understood their role in God's providential plan. Little imagination is required to conceive how beliefs such as these might motivate and justify the construction of a stratified society ... evident in the lack of regard by colonial settlers for indigenous inhabitants of the continent and the justifications—often theological in nature—for displacement, cruelty, and murder.

create a society based on their beliefs.¹² Their understanding of scripture shaped their theological anthropology, thus shaping how they understood their role in God's providential plan.

The significance for America's emerging national identity of 'localizing' Calvinist doctrine as God's providential plan for America cannot be overstated. In these localized interpretations of God's plan, the first seeds of nationalist identity were planted... The colonial clergy's identification of America as a promised land and a chapter in God's sacred history conjures imaginings of the New World as a continuation of the ancient world, yet with a destiny all its own.¹³

Little imagination is required to conceive how beliefs such as these might motivate and justify the construction of a stratified society. Lamentably, one does not need to imagine it, because history tells that story. This is evident in the lack of regard by colonial settlers for indigenous inhabitants of the continent and the justifications—often theological in nature—for displacement, cruelty, and murder. This notion of European superiority was

7. Placher, *A History of Christian Theology*, 256.

8. Placher, *A History of Christian Theology*, 256.

9. Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity: Vol. II The Reformation to the Present Day* (New York: HarperOne, 2010), 281.

10. Placher, *A History of Christian Theology*, 255-256.

11. John Winthrop, "A Model of Christian Charity," in *Winthrop Papers, Vol. 2*. (Boston: Boston Massachusetts Historical Society, 1931), 47.

12. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, 280.

13. Morrison, *The Theologies of American Christian Nationalism*, 97-98.

made explicit in the concept of Manifest Destiny.¹⁴ The term was first used in 1845 with reference to the westward expansion of the United States through seizure of land from both indigenous nations and Mexico. The justification was, again, the belief in a destiny appointed by God for this specific purpose. Though the term Manifest Destiny was not in their vocabulary, the theological justification which undergirded it can be traced back to the early Puritan colonizers.¹⁵

Jonathan Edwards, Puritan society, and the First Great Awakening

For the first generation of Puritan immigrants, the transatlantic voyage served as a theological vetting process; those who made it were surely among God's elect. However, it was much more difficult to determine if subsequent generations also were. This was critical, because to establish a truly godly society—a city upon a hill, to whom the world looks as an example of godliness—lackadaisical piety and undisciplined morality would be insufficient. Thus, there arose a practical demand to prove one's place in the community, so a religious revival emerged characterized by conversion experiences known as the First Great Awakening.¹⁶

Some, such as Jonathan Edwards, were initially skeptical of the revivalist movement led by traveling preachers such as George Whitefield. However, he later embraced this distinct expression of Christianity and threw his influence behind it.¹⁷ Conversion experiences became a prerequisite for church membership in many churches in Puritan New England and functioned as evidence of one's election.¹⁸ The division between “elect” and “un-elect” became increasingly visible and clearly defined.¹⁹

14. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, 329.

15. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, 329.

16. Placher, *A History of Christian Theology*, 257.

17. Placher, *A History of Christian Theology*, 260.

18. Morrison, *The Theologies of American Christian Nationalism*, 105.

19. Placher, *A History of Christian Theology*, 257. Failure to provide convincing proof of a conversion experience meant disqualification from church membership, the revocation of voting privileges, and an inability to partake in the sacraments of baptism and communion. The voting to which this refers was not limited to

Conversion experiences became a prerequisite for church membership in many churches in Puritan New England and functioned as evidence of one's election. The division between “elect” and “un-elect” became increasingly visible and clearly defined.

God's chosen people not only have the right to rule, but are obligated to rule. This emerged as a development from Calvinist belief in total depravity; it was concluded that only the elect—being recipients of God's grace—are able to curb sin and lead effectively. ... Dwight and his sympathizers understood themselves to be divinely appointed instruments of God's will, chosen by God to carry out God's preordained victory.

The spiritually of the First Great Awakening was spread throughout the colonies by traveling preachers to provide what can be considered “the first ‘national’ experience shared by all the colonies.”²⁰ Embedded early on in the fabric of what would become the United States of America was a faith significantly influenced by New England Puritanism and a distinct understanding of election and the nation's chosenness.²¹

Timothy Dwight

For the Puritans, governance was incorporated directly in their religious beliefs. The first-generation immigrant and Puritan clergyman John Higginson articulated this vision: “I say the cause of religion to be the profession and practice of the one true Religion to be in all things according to God's Word. This was the Cause of God and Israel then, the same is the cause of God and his people now...the cause of God and his people in New England.”²²

Higginson's statement articulates a belief in the right of the Puritans to enforce religious laws in a civil capacity. God's chosen people not only have the right to rule, but are obligated to rule. This emerged as a development from Calvinist belief in total depravity; it was concluded that only the elect—being recipients of God's grace—are able to curb sin and lead effectively.²³

ecclesial settings, but pertained to one's civic rights. As mentioned previously, the Puritans' faith permeated every aspect of life within their communities. Because of this, magistrates enforced laws on religiosity and ethical behavior. Breaking the sabbath, skipping worship, and blasphemy were all crimes one could be prosecuted for committing.

20. Placher, *A History of Christian Theology*, 260.

21. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, 288-290.

22. John Higginson, *The Cause of God and His People in New England*, quoted in David H. Morrison, (PhD diss. Princeton Theological Seminary, 2024), 96.

23. Stephen E. Berk, *Calvinism versus Democracy: Timothy*

This ideology is perhaps most significantly represented in the thought and work of Timothy Dwight. Dwight, the maternal grandson of Jonathan Edwards, was a Congregationalist minister, who exerted a major influence on the shape of post-Revolutionary American conservatism.²⁴ Dwight served as president of Yale College, his alma mater, from 1795-1817.²⁵

He believed that through the spread of Christianity, the nation and, eventually, the world would be ushered into the reign of Christ promised in the Book of Revelation.²⁶ The Christianization of the fledgling United States was the first step toward fulfilling this destiny.²⁷ Therefore, Dwight and his sympathizers understood themselves to be divinely appointed instruments of God's will, chosen by God to carry out God's preordained victory.²⁸

Dwight's thoughts concerning the election of the nation are given clear articulation in his address delivered to the graduating class of Yale College in 1776. Dwight exhorts the graduates to harness God's blessing for empirical purposes, stating that "to finish the superiority of North America over every other country, the Most High has replenished it with every source of strength and greatness."²⁹ He concludes that "we have the best foundation to believe that this continent will be the principal seat of that new, that peculiar kingdom, which shall be given to the Saints of the Most High. That also was to be the last, the greatest the happiest of all dominions."³⁰

The fulfillment of this vision is for Dwight the highest aim of humankind. Therefore, any price one pays to achieve it is worth it. Dwight's message to these graduates was clear: they are themselves a part of a nation which possesses a unique relationship with God. They must be willing to fight on the nation's behalf so that they may live into their ordained destiny. By conquering both indigenous nations and colonial rivals "America was free to fulfill her predestined role as a new Zion."³¹

In his eleven-volume epic poem, *The Conquest of Canaan*, Dwight explicitly compares the American Revolution to the Israelite seizure of Canaan. In a section of the tenth book, he explores how God's divine will manifests itself in the history of the nation. Joshua, mourning the bloodshed of the conflict which forged the nation, cries out to God in lamentation. God then assures Joshua—a character Dwight explicitly compares to George Washington—that everything which has happened has been ordained by God. Specifically, the death and sorrow which has been wrought. God states:

For Rushdoony, "the purpose of Christ's atoning work was to restore man to a position of covenant-keeping instead of covenant-breaking, to enable man to keep the law by freeing man, 'from the law of sin and death' (Rom 8:2)." In summary, only those elected by God are able to fulfill God's original calling for humanity. This calling—which Rushdoony interprets in an incredibly narrow sense—is traced back to Genesis 1:28, where God exhorts humankind to subdue the earth and exercise dominion over it.

My power, my wisdom, with divine control,
Surveys, preserves, directs and moves the whole.³²

Dwight's claims that God is sovereign over each event of history, implying that God's volition is revealed as the source of the world's horrors. The dissipation of the blessing for which Joshua and, by extension, the nation strives not only condones but requires violence. For Dwight, violence is justified as a means through which God, who predestines every event in history, works. And it is God's elect who are chosen to carry it out.³³

R.J. Rushdoony and Christian reconstructionism

Rousas John Rushdoony is recognized as the founder of Christian Reconstructionism. Rushdoony held a pre-millennial eschatology; believing that through the reconstruction of society in accordance with biblical ethics that the apocalypse could be inaugurated and Christ would establish his rule on earth.³⁴ Rushdoony's magnum opus, *The Institutes of Biblical Law*, is a systematic explication of biblical law in which he attempts to justify its implementation in modern government. He believes his work was a return to the model set forth by the Puritans of New England where "the law of God, without any sense of innovation, was made the law of the Colony."³⁵

Dwight and the Origins of American Evangelical Orthodoxy (Hamden, CT: Archon Books), 6.

24. Berk, *Calvinism versus Democracy*, viii.

25. Berk, *Calvinism versus Democracy*, 5.

26. Berk, *Calvinism versus Democracy*, 18.

27. Berk, *Calvinism versus Democracy*, 18-19.

28. Berk, *Calvinism versus Democracy*, 19.

29. Timothy Dwight, *A Valedictory Address to the Young Gentlemen, Who Commenced Bachelors of Arts, at Yale-College* July 25th. 1776 (New Haven: Thomas and Samuel Green, 1776), 8.

30. Dwight, *A Valedictory Address*, 14.

31. Berk, *Calvinism versus Democracy*, 25.

32. Timothy Dwight, *The Conquest of Canaan: A Poem in Eleven Books* (Hartford: Elisha Babcock, 1785), 234.

33. Berk, *Calvinism versus Democracy*, 58.

34. Whitehead and Perry, 11.

35. Rousas John Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law* (Craig Press, 1973), 1.

For Rushdoony, “the purpose of Christ’s atoning work was to restore man to a position of covenant-keeping instead of covenant-breaking, to enable man to keep the law by freeing man, ‘from the law of sin and death’ (Rom 8:2).” In summary, only those elected by God are able to fulfill God’s original calling for humanity. This calling—which Rushdoony interprets in an incredibly narrow sense—is traced back to Genesis 1:28, where God exhorts humankind to subdue the earth and exercise dominion over it. Having failed to do this, God called Abraham to “re-establish the Kingdom of God,” and, subsequently, Israel to “subdue the earth, and to exercise dominion under God.”³⁶ He believed that “as the new chosen people of God, the Christians are commanded to do that which Adam in Eden, and Israel in Canaan, failed to do. “One and the same covenant, under differing administrations, still prevails. Man is summoned to create the society God requires.”³⁷

One sees in Rushdoony a connection to the Puritan desire to homogenize political and religious life into a single entity; a desire mandated by God’s election. Rushdoony relies heavily on Calvin’s understanding of double-predestinarian election and interprets the world through this lens, though in a way that Calvin did not. This position led him to extreme conclusions such as a fervent belief that Enlightenment notions of human equality were completely anti-Christian and that democracy was equally antithetical. He defended chattel slavery, opposed interracial marriage, discouraged the education of women and African Americans, and staunchly opposed the rights of either to vote.³⁸

Stephen Wolfe and the case for Christian nationalism

Perhaps the most systematic articulation of contemporary Christian nationalist ideology is given by Stephen Wolfe in *The Case for Christian Nationalism*. Wolfe openly promotes the “institutionalization of Christianity”³⁹ and, like Dwight and Rushdoony, believes the United States must “return to the old Protestant principles of our spiritual forefathers.”⁴⁰

Though he does not cite Rushdoony, Wolfe similarly identifies “dominion” as the primary vocation of humankind. He argues

36. Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law*, 3.

37. Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law*, 4.

38. Kristin Kobes Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2020), 75.

39. Stephen Wolfe, *The Case for Christian Nationalism* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2022), 5.

40. Wolfe, *The Case for Christian Nationalism*, 399.

Wolfe argues Christians are compelled by God to fight for Christian nationalism since, as God’s elect, “Christians should look upon the world as their inheritance.”

What is evident in Christian nationalism is a framework built upon Calvin’s doctrine of election that has been co-opted to justify a discriminatory and oppressive politics through coercion and force.

that “Adam’s original task, his dominion mandate, was to bring the earth to maturity” and argues that Adam’s sin was his failure to subdue the earth. Having dominion over the earth “served as the condition for eternal life,” being “the divinely prescribed condition for God to bestow eternal life on him and his progeny.”⁴¹ Thus, for Wolfe, Christian nationalism is a means to recover what was lost in the fall. “Christian nationalism is the recovery of a Christian *megalothymia*—a collective will for Christian dominion of the world.”⁴² Wolfe argues Christians are compelled by God to fight for Christian nationalism since, as God’s elect, “Christians should look upon the world as their inheritance.”⁴³

Theological analysis

What is evident in Christian nationalism is a framework built upon Calvin’s doctrine of election that has been co-opted to justify a discriminatory and oppressive politics through coercion and force. In Calvin’s theology, God’s election pertains to the salvation of individuals and posits that God has chosen which particular people will be saved and which particular people will be damned.⁴⁴ He states in Book III of the *Institutes*, “God by his eternal and immutable counsel determined once for all those whom it was his pleasure one day to admit to salvation, and those whom, on the other hand, it was his pleasure to doom to destruction.”⁴⁵

In this framework, there exists from eternity two distinct groups within humanity with separate and distinct ends. One is created for the purpose of receiving mercy, the other for the purpose of receiving wrath. This gives rise to a terrifying thought that humanity has not been created equal, and that there exists two separate teleological horizons for humankind. For Christian nationalists, the assumption is that they and those who believe

41. Wolfe, *The Case for Christian Nationalism*, 21.

42. Wolfe, *The Case for Christian Nationalism*, 448. Political leaders have also leaned into the myths which support Christian nationalism. Donald J. Trump, “Inaugural Address,” January 20, 2025, claimed that he “was saved by God to make America great again.” One can argue concerning the degree of intention or awareness on the part of the president, but it is clear that his claim reflects the idea of divine election which is tied inherently to a political mandate.

43. Wolfe, *The Case for Christian Nationalism*, 448.

44. John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion: Volume Two, Book Three*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society), 534.

45. Calvin, *The Institutes*, 540.

as they do are the elect; any opposition they face is interpreted as evidence of the dissenting party's reprobation.

Calvin's dualism is evident in Christian nationalist rhetoric, specifically in the insistence upon the obligation of elect people to subjugate and rule those outside the scope of election. It serves as the foundation upon which a larger, nationalist project relies.⁴⁶ In Christian nationalism, the beliefs about election undergird other beliefs about the movement, their relationship to God, and their relationship to those outside of the movement.

Trinitarian response

Although Calvin's theology is co-opted and distorted in fundamental ways, his theology does provide the double-predestinarian framework which is instrumental to Christian nationalist beliefs. Thus, merely recovering Calvin's own theology is insufficient to address Christian nationalism's distortion of the doctrine. Moreover, Calvin's interpretation of Paul's argument in Romans is incomplete and results in a fundamental misunderstanding of God's election.

Romans 9-11

In the *Institutes*, Calvin relies heavily upon Paul's letter to the Romans in developing his doctrine of election; specifically, the ninth chapter. The problem with Calvin's interpretation is that he fails to follow the totality of Paul's argument and articulates his doctrine based on a reading which fails to consider adequately the structure of chapters nine through eleven as a single literary unit. In this passage, Paul wrestles with the fact that the Messiah had come and yet many of his own people did not recognize him.⁴⁷ To address this dilemma, Paul employs a range of rhetorical techniques. The first is a hypothetical solution which he offers to his audience.⁴⁸ Perhaps, Paul posits, God has created some for the sake of displaying wrath and others for revealing divine mercy (Rom 9:13-18).⁴⁹ Calvin's interpretation takes these words of

In this framework, there exists from eternity two distinct groups within humanity with separate and distinct ends. One is created for the purpose of receiving mercy, the other for the purpose of receiving wrath. This gives rise to a terrifying thought that humanity has not been created equal, and that there exists two separate teleological horizons for humankind.

Paul to be a statement of fact. Thus, Calvin concludes that God has indeed fashioned some to exercise wrath against and others for mercy.⁵⁰

This may seem a fair and straightforward interpretation. However, prudence suggests we heed Gaventa's wisdom concerning this passage. She acknowledges the complexity of Paul's argument. Throughout, Paul will introduce a proposition, then quickly dismiss it out of hand. Because of this, Gaventa warns against reading any pericope from these chapters in isolation.⁵¹

Additionally, it is important to note how Paul is not speculating about all people generally—whether they were created as objects of “wrath” or “mercy.” Rather, Paul speculates concerning Jews specifically; addressing the dilemma that they do not recognize Jesus as the Messiah. Thus, Paul concludes his meditation not by affirming that some have indeed been created as objects of wrath, but rather that “all Israel will be saved (Romans 11:26).” Further clarification is required, however. Considering the previous distinctions Paul has made—specifically between “children of the promise” and the rest of Israel in chapter nine—some interpreters have concluded that the Israel to whom Paul is

46. Anthony D. Smith, “Ethnic Election and National Destiny: Some Religious Origins of Nationalist Ideals,” in *Nations and Nationalism* vol. 5, 3 (July 1999), 347. Smith states that “old religious beliefs in election were continually repeated from the pulpit and in the classroom, to form a trunk onto which the modern ideas of national mission and destiny could be grafted, and through which these ancient beliefs could be given a political and national reinterpretation.”

47. Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *Romans: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2024), 265.

48. Ben Witherington III with Darlene Hyatt, *Paul's Letter to the Romans: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 236-237. Paul's argument is sophisticated and sometimes confusing. He does not follow a straight path to arrive at a clear conclusion. He uses a range of techniques; raising rhetorical questions, arguing with imagined interlocutors, confessing his own emotional response, making direct appeals to the audience, and using elaborate illustrations and metaphors.

49. Romans 9:13-18. As it is written, “I have loved Jacob, but I have hated Esau. What then are we to say? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means! For he says to Moses, ‘I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.’ So it depends not on human will or exertion but on God who shows mercy. For the scripture says to Pharaoh, ‘I have raised you up for this

very purpose, that I may show my power in you and that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth.’ So then he has mercy on whom-ever he chooses, and he hardens the heart of whomever he chooses.”

50. Calvin, *The Institutes*, 534. In Calvin, the fate of individuals rests entirely on the will of God to save them or reject them. Calvin believes that this decree of God takes place in eternity, before they were created. Thus, when God does create individuals, God does so with the intention of saving them or damning them. “All are not created on equal terms, but some are preordained to eternal life, others to eternal damnation; and, accordingly, as each has been created for one or other of these ends, we say that he has been predestinated to life or to death.” This is further reinforced for Calvin by language in verses 22 and 23, where Paul uses the terms “objects of wrath” and “objects of mercy” in reference to the two distinct groups.

51. Gaventa, *Romans*, 266, writes that “landing prematurely on any individual statement is costly, as some earlier comments are reframed and even subverted later on.”

referring is merely the “true Israelites” identified at the beginning of the passage. Thus, all the “true Israelites” will be saved, but those masquerading will not.

Paul himself provides the interpretive key. In 11:5, he acknowledges the remnant chosen by grace, those who are identified as the true Israelites in 9:6.⁵² A few verses later in 11:11, he refers to those who have been hardened, not currently a part of the “remnant” and clarifies that the condition of these hardhearted Israelites is temporary. “So I ask, have *they* [the hardened, un-elect] stumbled so as to fall? By no means! But through their stumbling salvation has come to the gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous. Now if their stumbling means riches for the world and if their loss means riches for gentiles, how much more will their full inclusion mean!”⁵³ Paul’s conclusion is that there is no part of Israel, not a single Israelite, that has, “stumbled so as to fall.” The designation of the hardening as a temporally finite phenomenon gives Paul’s readers confidence that each Israelite is indeed destined for salvation. The Israel to which Paul refers in verse 26 includes the totality of Israel, whether presently confessing Christ or not.

The significance for constructing a theology of election is this: the only group which Paul posits may have been created as objects of divine wrath—Jews whose hearts have been hardened and do not recognize Jesus—will be the recipients of universal salvation. In the end, Paul concludes that none of those about whom he speculates have been pre-destined for anything but God’s unfailing love and mercy. Ultimately, there are no vessels of wrath with none destined for retribution. This clearly undermines the binary theological anthropology upon which Christian nationalism rests.

The visible “elect” community in Christ is a temporary point along an ever-widening continuum of God’s election. The gathering of the church by the Holy Spirit does not evince the nullification of God’s promise nor a clarification regarding to whom it pertains; rather God has demonstrated unwavering faithfulness. The apparent hardening of some Israelites is not evidence of God’s rejection, rather, God is working through it to widen the scope of election (Rom 11:31–32). The “non-elect” in the end prove to be a category that does not exist in Paul’s theology.

This perspective on election is not isolated to Paul; it reverberates throughout scripture, beginning with Abram in Genesis 12. Here God informs Abram that through his election “all the families of the earth will be blessed (Gen 12:3).” From the beginning, the implication of election is that the blessing of election extends beyond the initial elect community. This can also be seen in the divine mercy shown to the Ninevites in Jonah—a civilization antagonistic to God’s elect—as well as in first Isaiah.⁵⁴ This pattern is perhaps given its clearest expression in Jesus’ ethics. His ministry is constantly surprising in how he reaches out to those who are ostracized or marginalized. Take for example his

interaction with the Syrophoenician woman in Mark 8 and the woman at the well in John 4.

This, as Catherine LaCugna has aptly argued, is where the theologian must make their point of departure regarding the doctrine of election.⁵⁵ Lamentably, the doctrine of election has historically been a matter of abstract speculation regarding decrees far removed from the realm of human inquiry and understanding. They have been divorced from the work of the Triune God in Christ through the Holy Spirit. This runs counter to the logic of the Triune God who has been incarnated, crucified, and risen from the dead. This God calls and sends the church through the Holy Spirit to proclaim the risen Christ and baptize in the name of the Trinity. It is because of this schism that the doctrine of election has become susceptible to co-opting by Christian nationalism. Thus, to properly understand and articulate God’s election, one must first look to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit rather than engage in speculation removed from the economy of salvation.

Trinitarian election

In response to the coopting of election in Christian nationalism, we consider how theologians have drawn upon the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ as the foundation for the doctrine of election. Jürgen Moltmann recognizes that the Markan passion account illumines God’s relationship to election in a stark manner. Here God transgresses an assumed boundary between blessed and cursed, elect and un-elect, stating “the cross of the Son divides God from God to the utmost degree of enmity and distinction.”⁵⁶ Yet for Moltmann, it does not end here as “the resurrection of the Son abandoned by God united God with God in the most intimate fellowship;”⁵⁷ and with the Son, those with whom he has been joined, those doomed to death because of sin who have now been offered the new life of God in Jesus Christ. “[The cross] must undermine, remove, and destroy the things which mark men out as elect and non-elect.”⁵⁸ Restoration is achieved in a manner that is not coercive or violent; realized through kenotic love which resists violence to the bitter end.

On the cross God does not overcome God’s enemies through force. Rather, as Tanner notes, “Jesus overcomes our weeping and terror by weeping and being terrified.”⁵⁹ In submitting to the

52. Romans 9:6. Paul writes “at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace.”

53. Romans 11:11–12.

54. As in Jonah, God promises blessing, deliverance, and healing to both Egypt and Assyria in Isaiah 19.

55. Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God For Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (Chicago: HarperOne, 1973), 209. LaCugna locates God’s revelation in the economy of salvation as the entry point for trinitarian theology. She argues that the doctrine of the Trinity emerged not from abstract musing by heady intellectuals but from the revelation of God’s action in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit. Thus, she rejects a distinction between who God is in Godself, and who God has revealed Godself to be in Christ through the Spirit.

56. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, trans. R. A. Wilson and John Bowden (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 152.

57. Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 152.

58. Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 194.

59. Kathryn Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity, and the Trinity: A Brief Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 18.

violence of the cross and overcoming it in love, God in Christ “dispels the lie at the heart of their violence.”⁶⁰ René Girard points out the cross undermines the justification of violence in God’s name.

Christ does not achieve this victory through violence. He obtains it through a renunciation of violence so complete that violence can rage to its heart’s content without realizing that by so doing, it reveals what it must conceal, without suspecting that its fury will turn back against it this time because it will be recorded and represented with exactness in the Passion narratives.⁶¹

The cross exposes that the goal of Christian dominion is oxymoronic. The cross of Christ reveals God’s unequivocal rejection of violence or coercion in God’s name.

In similar fashion, Barth emphasizes that God in Christ has assumed the position of the “un-elect.” He writes:

...it is strictly and narrowly only in the portrait of the one Jesus Christ that we may perceive who and what a rejected man is. It is He who—just because of His election—is cast out from the presence of God by His righteous law and judgment, and delivered to eternal death. In the genuine fulfilment of genuine election, it is His life which is truly the life of the man who must suffer the destructive hostility of God.”⁶²

For Barth, Christ’s rejection reveals God’s election of humanity. It is Christ who bears the rejection of the sinner; in being joined to that condition, the sinner is joined to Christ in his resurrection.

In the crucified and risen Christ, the divide between elect and un-elect is eviscerated. Rejection is borne by Christ who transforms it by the righteousness of God. Thus, Barth claims that “rejection is no more than the shadow of election.”⁶³ This mirrors Paul who testifies “God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that [God] may be merciful to all” (Rom 11:32). Therefore, Barth concludes “there is in the fullness of God no election and rejection, no Gentile and Jew, no outer and inner. All are one—in Christ Jesus.”⁶⁴ Scott Bader-Saye thus concludes:

If God’s election of Israel had the Gentiles in its purview from the beginning, and if the telos of election is “to gather up all things in [Christ] . . . , then there is no group that is a priori excluded from the covenant. Indeed, we cannot set any limits on the extend of God’s ingathering of the creation. We might even say that the logic of the

The primary sources which inform the ideology rarely, if ever, mention the cross. If it does show up, the cross serves the purpose of saving the elect to fulfil the divine mandate of dominion. Christian nationalism strategically avoids the cross because it is a stumbling block.

trinitarian economy of election points toward a full inclusion of all creation in God’s eschatological reign.⁶⁵

This leads to our conclusion about a politic which follows the pattern of Christ’s life and death.

Political implications of election

God’s election is a call to cruciformity. This is a crucial acknowledgement in engagement with Christian nationalism. The primary sources which inform the ideology rarely, if ever, mention the cross. If it does show up, the cross serves the purpose of saving the elect to fulfil the divine mandate of dominion.⁶⁶

Christian nationalism strategically avoids the cross because it is a stumbling block. The cruciform shape of the triune God’s election is a barrier to the lust for power and control. As Moltmann writes, “Man seeks God in the will for political power and domination. If he sees and believes God in Christ who was powerless and crucified, he is set free from this desire to have power and domination over others.”⁶⁷

The elect are called to follow in step with the economy of God’s salvation: to minister through peace and love and to reject violence unequivocally. The election of God disqualifies coercion for the sake of any end, in step with the incarnate, crucified, and risen Christ. As Hauerwas notes concerning Christ’s evangelism, “Jesus refuses to enslave us by a miracle, which means that he wants us to love him for the love he is.”⁶⁸ Those who believe themselves to be God’s elect inherit no claim over and against those they believe to be outside the scope of election. Evangelism through force or coercion is antithetical to the Christian gospel.

The politics of election follow the model embodied in Christ. “The politics of election is not a politics of domination or power but a politics of dispossession in exile, awaiting (while embodying)

60. René Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, trans. James G. Williams (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2001), 127.

61. Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, 140.

62. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics III/2: The Doctrine of God*, trans. G.W. Bromiley, J.C. Campbell, Iain Wilson, et al. eds. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957), 352.

63. Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 401.

64. Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 404.

65. Scott Bader-Saye, *The Church and Israel After Christendom: The Politics of Election* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 1999), 136.

66. Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law*, 3-4 and Wolfe, *The Case for Christian Nationalism*, 21.

67. Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 69.

68. Stanley Hauerwas, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2006), 53.

the coming reign of God.”⁶⁹ Election does not create two distinct communities—one possessing authority over the other—but one community of self-emptying love into which all are welcomed and offered a place through God’s grace. A cruciform community, unequivocally opposed to violence and retribution! For the righteousness of God is not revealed in “the judgement and punishment of the godless” but by the gratuitous mercy of God to those who are God’s “enemies” (Rom 5:10).

69. Bader-Saye, *The Church and Israel After Christendom*, 137.

Election does not create two distinct communities—one possessing authority over the other—but one community of self-emptying love into which all are welcomed and offered a place through God’s grace.
