
Wise as Serpents, Innocent as Doves: Responding to Christian Nationalism Through Political Power and Gospel Proclamation

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Over 100 children died on February 28, 2026, when a US American Tomahawk missile destroyed Shajareh Tayyebbeh Primary School in Minab, Iran. Two days later, Pete Hegseth—the US Secretary of War—announced his approach to US military combat in Iran: “No stupid rules of engagement, no nation-building quagmire, no democracy building exercise, no politically correct wars.”¹ Three weeks after that, Hegseth prayed at the Pentagon’s monthly Christian worship service:

Almighty God, who trains our hands for war and our fingers for battle. You who stirred the nations from the north against Babylon of old, making her land a desolation where none dwell. Behold now the wicked who rise against your justice and the peace of the righteous. Snap the rod of the oppressor, frustrate the wicked plans and break the teeth of the ungodly. By the blast of your anger, let the evil perish. Let their bulls go down to slaughter, for their day has come, the time of their punishment. Pour out your wrath upon those who plot vain things and blow them away like chaff before the wind. Grant this taskforce clear and righteous targets for violence. Surround them as a shield. Protect the innocent and blameless in their midst. Make their arrows like those of a skilled warrior who returned not empty-handed. Let every round find its mark against the enemies of righteousness and our great nation. Give them wisdom in every decision, endurance for the trial ahead, unbreakable unity, and overwhelming violence of action against those who deserve no mercy. Preserve their lives, sharpen their resolve, and let justice be executed swiftly and without remorse, that evil may be driven back and wicked souls be delivered to the eternal damnation prepared for them. For the wicked flee when no one pursues, but the righteous are as bold

How should those Christians who find this political program incompatible with the way of Jesus respond to the challenges of Christian nationalism? To orient a response to this question, I turn to Matthew 10:16, in which Jesus tells his disciples, “I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.”

as a lion. We ask these things with bold confidence in the mighty and powerful name of Jesus Christ, king over all kings, and amen.²

Having overseen a campaign that resulted in bombing a school, Hegseth stressed the stupidity of rules of engagement and prayed that the victims of their violence be delivered to damnation.

Hegseth’s position at the head of the US military apparatus represents a great victory for Christian nationalism. I appreciate the definition of Christian nationalism which New Testament scholar Obery M. Hendricks Jr. offers:

Christian nationalism is best understood as a political ideology that holds that America’s government is not legitimate, nor can it be, until its laws and policies are thoroughly consistent with the Christian nationalists’

1. Philip Wang and Richard Hall, “More Than 100 School Children Were Killed in Iran. Evidence Points to a U.S. Missile Strike,” *Time* (March 11, 2026), <https://time.com/article/2026/03/11/iran-school-strike-minab-tomahawk/>.

2. Hegseth attributed this prayer to the chaplain who accompanied the January 3, 2026, US raid that kidnapped Venezuelan president Nicolás Maduro and his wife. *WATCH: Hegseth Prays for “overwhelming Violence” against Enemies*, PBS NewsHour (2026), YouTube video, 6:38, <https://youtu.be/2NrJU2aqGvQ>.

narrow, sometimes idiosyncratic, and at times convoluted readings of the biblical text.³

For those who take issue with this political ideology, Hegseth's Crusade-tinged⁴ theology and its wholesale endorsement of brutality in the US attack on Iran mark out only a single theater of battle, as it were. In the area of education, Christian nationalist efforts are dismantling diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives that make education more accessible for a broad range of US children and financially undermining public education through "school choice" programs that transfer public funding to private religious schools.⁵ The Department of Homeland Security deployed a Christian nationalist reading of Proverbs 28:1 to recruit agents for its deadly and destructive deportation campaigns in major US cities.⁶ This litany of Christian nationalist offenses could continue with federal attacks on gender-affirming care, vaccinations, government assistance programs for those in poverty, and many more. Here's the point: Pete Hegseth is just the blood-drenched tip of the Christian nationalist spear.⁷

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- 1) We must be wise as serpents, addressing Christian nationalism not only in terms of morality, but also in terms of *power*.
- 2) We must remain innocent as doves, remembering and proclaiming the fullness of the gospel in a way that faithfully orients our political action.

3. Obery M. Hendricks Jr., *Christians Against Christianity: How Right-Wing Evangelicals Are Destroying Our Nation and Our Faith* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2021), 4.

4. Julia Carrie Wong, "Pete Hegseth's Holy War: The Militant Christian Theology Animating the US Attack on Iran," *Guardian US* (New York, April 10, 2026), <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/ng-interactive/2026/apr/10/pete-hegseth-christianity-iran-war-crusade>.

5. Kevin J. Burke and Heidi Hadley, *Christian Nationalism and Educational Policy in the United States* (National Education Policy Center, 2025), 7–8, <http://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/christian-nationalism>.

6. Proverbs 28:1 is, coincidentally, quoted in the above prayer read by Hegseth. The KJV reads, "The wicked flee when no man pursueth; but the righteous are bold as a lion." Fiona André, "DHS Is Using the Bible to Promote ICE, Claiming 'Righteous' Fight against Immigrants," *Religious News Service* (August 19, 2025), <https://religionnews.com/2025/08/19/homeland-security-quotes-bible-in-messaging-on-immigration-enforcement/>.

7. I suspect Hegseth would appreciate what I imagine most readers take as a negative characterization. This points toward the possible fruitlessness of responding effectively to Christian nationalism primarily as a moral problem.

Christian nationalism does not present a *crisis* just because it is morally wrong. Rather, the challenge presented by Christian nationalism rises to the level of crisis because of its *material* impact. ... The problem with Christian nationalism is that it is destroying lives: individual, communal, human, and more-than-human.

Wise as serpents

Christian nationalism is morally objectionable to many Christians. Those of us who stress Jesus' second great commandment—"love your neighbor as yourself"—witness the words of Hegseth or the flood of anti-trans legislation sweeping the nation by recoiling in disgust. Should we be sufficiently bold and willing to bear the potential relational and professional costs, we may name Christian nationalism as evil and assure ourselves that we are on the "right side of history." We are fully equipped to take the moral high ground and passionately pelt Christian nationalist figures with verbal slings and arrows. We can call upon people of good conscience to reject intolerance and imperialism in all forms. And, in doing so, we can continue to look with disdain as Christian nationalism tears communities apart and spreads strife across the globe.

Do not get me wrong; moral integrity matters. However, Christian nationalism does not present a *crisis* just because it is morally wrong. Rather, the challenge presented by Christian nationalism rises to the level of crisis because of its *material* impact. The big problem with Hegseth is not that he's a kind of Christian I find distasteful, or even just that he is boorish or blasphemous or bloodthirsty. The problem with Hegseth is that he is actively and decisively contributing to genocide and global strife. The problem with Christian nationalism is that it is destroying lives: individual, communal, human, and more-than-human.

When we answer the question of how we might respond to Christian nationalism, we must be wise as serpents and address the issue of *power*. By power, I mean the ability to make things happen in society. In community-organizing circles—among those who devote themselves to creating change in their communities—power is often conceptualized in terms of organized people and organized money. If someone wants to change laws, bring down institutions, create support networks in our communities, redistribute resources to make the rich richer or to eliminate poverty, they need a group of people working in concert to accomplish their goals. They need people to knock on doors, craft legislation, engage in strategic

planning, coordinate the transportation of goods, set up chairs at community meetings, and the list goes on. To make something happen in society, you need organized people. And those organized people will need to buy materials, pay people for their work, advertise their efforts, and so on. If you have organized people and organized money, you have power.

Christian nationalism organizes people and money through its cultural impact. While a substantial majority of US Americans (64%) do not support Christian nationalist values or policies, those values are widely proclaimed in US churches, particularly in those attended by white evangelicals, and those policies are validated by prominent news outlets.⁸ This persistent and coordinated effort to promote Christian nationalism has a political impact, most prominently through its mobilization of support for Donald Trump.⁹

If we want to respond effectively to Christian nationalism, we must respond to its capacity to organize people and money. While there is certainly value in contesting Christian nationalist views when they are voiced in our communities, that alone is not enough. Though enthusiastically rejecting Christian nationalism may be an important part of offering a bold, public witness that Christianity is not synonymous with Christian nationalism, that witness is an insufficient response. If we want to respond effectively to Christian nationalism, we need to build power. We need to organize people and money through the fundamental work of community organizing, that is, strategic relationship building.

The campaign that successfully made Illinois the first state in the US to eliminate money bail demonstrates the power of building three kinds of relationships. First, that campaign relied on large numbers of volunteers, who led teach-ins to spread awareness, lobbied Illinois state legislators, canvassed on behalf of sympathetic candidates for office, and engaged in civil disobedience. Second, campaign leadership fostered relationships with key elected officials, who introduced legislation to eliminate money bail and made policy changes to ease the transition toward that legislative change. Third, the campaign to end money bail was a coalition effort, requiring relationships between organizations that had differing priorities and values. The power of relationship building was crucial in making substantial structural change in Illinois by entirely eliminating a pillar of the unjust carceral system that had seemed like it simply could not be changed.¹⁰

8. *Mapping Christian Nationalism Across the 50 States: Insights from PRRI's 2025 American Values Atlas*, PRRI (2026), 6–9, <https://prri.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/PRRI-Feb-2026-CN-in-50-states.pdf>.

9. A 2024 PRRI study found a strong positive correlation between the prevalence of Christian nationalist views in a state and that state's level of support for Donald Trump in the 2024 election. *Christian Nationalism Across All 50 States: Insights from PRRI's 2024 American Values Atlas*, PRRI (2025), 15, <https://prri.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/PRRI-Jan-2025-CN-Report-1.pdf>.

10. These insights came from an interview that Andrew Willis Garcés conducted with Will Tanzman, executive director of The People's Lobby, a Chicago-area power organization of which I am a member. Andrew Willis Garcés, "The Campaign to End Cash Bail,"

To make something happen in society, you need organized people. And those organized people will need to buy materials, pay people for their work, advertise their efforts, and so on. If you have organized people and organized money, you have power. Christian nationalism organizes people and money through its cultural impact.

The power wielded by Christian nationalism requires that serpent-wise Christians embrace the power of relationship building in these same three ways. First, we must get the people in our churches and communities involved in the challenging, long-term work of changing, defending, and renewing our laws and institutions. For some, that means forming deeper relationships with the people around us. For others, it means crossing that uncomfortable line of discussing politics in our relationships, as we follow Jesus in the work of loving our neighbors in material ways. Second, we need to form meaningful relationships with people in our communities who are positioned to facilitate change or reinforce resistance in the face of Christian nationalist power. To be clear, this does not only mean connecting with those who have already been outspoken in their rejection of Christian nationalism. It also means working with those who might need encouragement or ongoing support from their community to take a stand. Third, it is essential that we build relationships between organizations. For congregations, this means not only building or recommitting to ecumenical and interfaith alliances but also joining into larger, broad-based organizing coalitions.

When we ask what Christians can do in response to Christian nationalist power, the answer certainly is not that we should start some kind of resistance from scratch. There are groups that have been doing this power building work for years or even decades. Grounded in the sacred values of our faith—those things we feel are so important that we are moved to action that we might protect them¹¹—we recognize the sacred values held by people of other faiths or no faith. The demands of this moment urge us to join together in ever larger networks of relational power.

In committing to this practice of building power, there are three more things we should keep in mind. First, as we approach others to invite them into relationship, or draw the people we

The Forge (January 10, 2023), <https://forgeorganizing.org/article/campaign-end-cash-bail/>.

11. Aaron Stauffer, *Listening to the Spirit: The Radical Social Gospel, Sacred Value, and Broad-Based Community Organizing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2024), 37–47.

already know into action, it is helpful to attend to Alexia Salvatierra and Peter Heltzel's distinction between strategic conversation and manipulation.¹² We must allow our self-interest to enter our relationships if we are to respond effectively to Christian nationalism. In doing so, however, we must commit ourselves to finding mutually accountable alignment between our self-interest and that of others, resisting the temptation to let *self-interest* guide us into *selfish* manipulation that we might benefit at their expense.

Second, as power requires both organized people and organized money, we cannot be shy about raising money in support of our efforts to seek societal change and protect our communities. Just as we not only commit our time and talent but also our treasure for the sake of church ministries, we must take seriously the role of money in building power over against Christian nationalist power.

Finally, we must understand the difference between mobilizing and organizing if we are to develop into a mass movement. K. B. Brower outlines this distinction and its importance for attempts to contextualize the power of Christian nationalism:

Mobilizing is when we spend our time gathering up the people who already agree with us to participate in protest and public actions. Mobilizing does not expand our base, and it does not attempt to change people's hearts and minds in any enduring way. Organizing is how we move people who don't agree with us already, and it is how we expand our base of support.¹³

Brower stresses that religious institutions are particularly well-suited for organizing in this sense, as they are spaces in which people of significantly different social locations—and, crucially, political orientations—gather in common purpose.¹⁴ Taking seriously Jesus' call to be wise as serpents when we find ourselves surrounded by wolves, Christians can play a crucial role in responding effectively to Christian nationalist power.

Innocent as doves

As we take power seriously and build it ourselves, we must yet remain innocent as doves, remembering and proclaiming the fullness of the gospel in a way that faithfully orients our political action. I do not raise this point simply because it would be faithful to keep the gospel at the center of our lives, though it certainly would be. For a Christian response to Christian nationalism to be effective, it must offer a theological imagination that is at least as compelling as that of Christian nationalism.

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those policies and actions as Christian. We make a grave error if we understand the influence of Christian nationalism solely in terms of appeals to the greed of those who long to become millionaires and the xenophobic fear of those who cling to their nostalgic attachment to an imagined US past. Christian nationalism offers a theological imagination that is compelling to many.

Christian nationalism is not so closely coordinated that it could be said to have a singular version of the gospel. Nonetheless, it is possible to point to an understanding of the good news of Jesus Christ that orients the moral framework that would guide Christian nationalist politics. Insofar as Christian nationalism aims to bring US laws and policies in line with its interpretation of scripture, that aim is anchored in its interpretation of a pair of biblical texts: Genesis 1:28¹⁵ and Matthew 28:19.¹⁶ These verses are taken as hermeneutical keys to unlock the whole of scripture, that Christian nationalists might proclaim their good news for the contemporary United States: the aims of Christian nationalism are divinely mandated, not only by the words of Jesus Christ, but also by virtue of God's words at the dawn of creation.¹⁷

This interpretation of the gospel is, in turn, deployed to create a two-tiered system of Christian morality. On the one hand, there are the moral codes reflected in Christian nationalist executive orders, legislation, and Supreme Court decisions. Consider, for example, Executive Order 14168, which defines broad scientific consensus regarding the complexity of human gender as "gender ideology" and enshrines a conservative Christian reading of

12. Alexia Salvatierra and Peter Heltzel, *Faith-Rooted Organizing: Mobilizing the Church in Service to the World* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 141–144.

13. K. B. Brower, "Faith and Labor: Organizing for the Kingdom of God on Earth," in Gary Dorrien et al, eds., *Organizing Visions: Social Ethics and Broad-Based Solidarity Activism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2025), 85–86.

14. Brower, "Faith and Labor: Organizing for the Kingdom of God on Earth," 96.

15. "God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth'" (NRSVUE).

16. "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit..." (NRSVUE).

17. Hendricks, *Christians Against Christianity*, 6.

Genesis 1:27¹⁸ as reflecting “the biological reality of sex.”¹⁹ On what seems like a weekly basis, we hear about how regressive interpretations of scriptural commentary on human sexuality and gender are being used to justify the steady stripping away of rights and the creation of new, invasive impositions of Christian nationalist morality.

On the other hand, the Christian nationalist good news provides a high degree of moral impunity for those deemed effective in bringing about Christian nationalist domination of US government. We need to acknowledge the obvious moral contradictions between the boorish, blasphemous, bloodthirsty behavior of Donald Trump and the morality explicitly taught in those congregations that support Trump, and then recognize that Trump is afforded an exception to the more broadly applied moral norms of Christian nationalists. In fact, Hendricks argues that it is precisely because Trump evinces “blank-page malleability, easy susceptibility to flattery, and a moral compass so skewed as to be virtually nonexistent” that he is such an effective tool of the Christian nationalist march toward domination.²⁰ It is not simply that Christian nationalism carves out moral exceptions for Trump, Hegseth, and others who defy their conventional morality. Rather, figures such as Trump are lifted up as exemplars of the Christian life because of their role in advancing the cause of Christian nationalism.²¹

From a perspective skeptical or hostile toward Christian nationalism, this gospel and its morality are easy to dismiss as distasteful, intellectually flimsy, and spiritually exploitative. Ultimately, however, we must reckon with the fact that this Christian nationalist gospel is remarkably effective at inspiring and shaping desire in its adherents. Millions of US Americans long for the world promised by the Christian nationalist Jesus, a glorious victor and conqueror of nations.

Those of us who contest Christian nationalism, then, must foster an alternative desire, grounded in our own proclamation of the gospel that is capable of orienting a faithful moral structure. Rather than try to bring you around to my own take on a compelling gospel message, I offer three principles to guide the broader work of politically empowering, authentically faithful gospel proclamation.

First, to respond effectively to Christian nationalism, the work of gospel proclamation needs to be a serious, sustained, shared project among Christians who believe we are called to something other than nationalism. Gospel proclamation cannot be restricted to—or even centered on—the pulpit. Our response to the gospel cannot be fragmented and fractured as we worship in isolation on Sunday, then gather politically as an entirely separate activity.

18. “So God created humans in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (NRSVUE).

19. Defending Women from Gender Ideology Extremism and Restoring Biological Truth to the Federal Government, US Presidential Executive Order 14168 (2025).

20. Hendricks, *Christians Against Christianity*, 4.

21. Hendricks, *Christians Against Christianity*, 10–13.

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Rather, we are challenged by the dangers of Christian nationalism to understand our political work in the context of the liturgical lives of our churches, recognizing the ways in which political engagement can help to coordinate our shared lives of faith and contribute to our worship.²² As we gather in worship services and in political action—not leaving behind our various traditions, but coming to understand them in new ways in a broader context—we may find ourselves in a feedback loop that renews and enlivens our gospel proclamation. We may find ourselves able to speak not only to the thoughts and feelings we bring to worship services, but to the broader public.

Second, our gospel proclamation must genuinely reflect our experience of God’s presence in our lives and our communities. A carefully crafted political message with a veneer of theological language and a smattering of biblical allusions will neither embolden people to confront the power of Christian nationalism nor sustain them through costly confrontation with that power. When we proclaim the good news, we must truly be innocent as doves, witnessing to what we truly believe to be the movement of the Spirit, the living presence of God.

Finally, our proclamation of the gospel must leave room for the witness of others. This is a practical necessity. If we are to respond to Christian nationalism by joining together with others, we must be open to genuine encounter with them, mutually influencing one another. Beyond that practical necessity, though, this openness reflects an honest, humble assessment of what it is that we are doing when we teach and preach the Christian faith.

From the first time we hear the name Jesus to the moment we offer our final prayers, we are constructing our faith from what Willie James Jennings calls “fragments.” We bring together scraps of scripture, traditions entangled with cultural histories

22. In *Listening to the Spirit*, Aaron Stauffer explores the idea of understanding the community organizing practices of relational meetings and listening sessions as liturgical practices. Stauffer, *Listening to the Spirit*, xx.

that we only partially remember, and ecclesial practices caught up in capitalist commodification. We truly encounter God's saving grace, but we can make sense of it and share it only as we work with these fragments.²³ Each Christian who dares to proclaim the good news does so with the fragments they have been able to gather together; we can learn and grow by encountering others who have worked with the fragments available to them. As we proclaim the good news of the beloved community, of the kingdom of God, of eternal life, of the overwhelming power of the Holy Spirit, of authentic creatureliness, or of costly grace, we must be open to how our good news intersects with others. Innocent as doves, we might just find ourselves witnessing to a gospel that is yet deeper and truer. We might find ourselves proclaiming a gospel that empowers the kind of broad-based political action necessary to respond effectively to Christian nationalism.

Conclusion

There are good reasons to ask how Christians, who find embracing Christian nationalism incompatible with following Jesus, should respond to Christian nationalism. Christian nationalism endangers the wellbeing of creatures in this country and across the globe. As people who claim the same faith tradition—who claim to be led by the same Spirit and to love the same savior-sibling, Jesus Christ—we rightly feel responsibility to contest a movement that turns our faith toward destructive and degrading ends. As such, we must address both the public power that Christian nationalism organizes and the theological imagination that contributes to that organizing effort.

To respond to this dual threat effectively, we must be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Wise as serpents, we must address Christian nationalism not only in terms of morality, but also in terms of power. We must build power, organizing people and money in the interest of loving our neighbors through concrete, political means. And our power building must be oriented toward participation in broad-based movements seeking systemic political and economic change. Innocent as doves, we are called to remember and proclaim the fullness of the gospel in a way that faithfully orients our political action. This proclamation cannot be done in isolation, divided by lines of tradition and religion, but requires collaboration and mutual influence across traditions and religions. We must undertake the challenge of staying true to our experiences of God's presence in our communities, even as we are changed by the experiences of others.

What, then, might it mean to bring serpent wisdom and dove innocence together? How do we bring a gospel message and power politics together into a coherent Christian response to Christian nationalism? We take discipleship seriously, grounding the gospel message in relationships of accountability and encouraging one

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another to follow Jesus faithfully in the long-term political work of loving our neighbors. We not only preach our gospel message from pulpits, but also live it out in fellowship, accompaniment, relational meetings, listening sessions, and the many ways we gather, worship, and send one another out.

We resist the temptation to reduce people to pieces on a political board. Instead, we ground our politics in our mutual needs, collective gifts, and sacred values. In short, we bring the fullness of the fragmented lives of our communities together into a movement. We allow ourselves to believe in the promise that our faith can truly be a Jesus movement guided by the Spirit, even as we join in a broader societal movement to seek peace and justice in this country, across national boundaries, and throughout the planetary network of creatures to which we belong and on which we depend.

23. Jennings' discussion of fragments is focused on formal theological education. Nonetheless, his focus on theological education as a process of Christian formation makes his notion of "fragments" applicable more broadly. Willie James Jennings, *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020), 32–46.