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## Review of Andrew L. Whitehead's book "American Idolatry: How Christian Nationalism Betrays the Gospel and Threatens the Church"

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**ANDREW L. WHITEHEAD. *AMERICAN IDOLATRY: HOW CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM BETRAYS THE GOSPEL AND THREATENS THE CHURCH*. GRAND RAPIDS, MI: BRAZOS PRESS, 2023. XVIII +215 PAGES.**

**REVIEWED BY ROBERT D. CORNWALL<sup>1</sup>**

The 2023 General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), held in Louisville, Kentucky, received and affirmed sense-of-the-assembly resolution GA-2341 condemning Christian Nationalism. With this resolution, those gathered at the General Assembly resolved “that the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) denounces Christian Nationalism in all its forms as a distortion of the Christian faith, and commits to opposing it wherever it appears, for the sake of the gospel and the good of the human family.” In addition to the resolution, the 2023 Peter Ainslie and Forrest F. Reed Lecture, held as part of the Christian Unity and Interfaith Ministries/Disciples of Christ Historical Society Dinner, featured Andrew L. Whitehead, the author of *American Idolatry*. Whitehead’s lecture underscored the message given in the assembly resolution, reminding us that Christian nationalism is a threat not only to democracy but more importantly for the church, it is a betrayal of the Gospel.

Having been commissioned to review Whitehead’s book *American Idolatry* for this journal, which is focused on the history and theology of the Stone-Campbell Movement, I felt that it was important for me to keep in mind the Movement’s interactions with public life in the United States, and perhaps to a lesser extent, in Canada. The title of the first volume of David Edwin Harrell’s study of the social sources of division within the movement is illuminating when it comes to the way at least some within the Movement viewed its place within the history of the United States. The title of that book is *Quest for a Christian America: The Disciples of Christ and American Society to 1866*. Since the Disciples of Christ is an American-born tradition that emerged on what was then the frontier shortly after the founding of the United States as a nation-state, the history of the Movement is intertwined with that of the nation. While the early Disciples were

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sectarians of a New Testament variety, the postmillennialism that Campbell and others embraced (as seen in the title of Campbell's journal the *Millennial Harbinger*) lent itself to a commitment to the regeneration of the nation, which would enable it to lead to the regeneration of the world. We see forms of Christian nationalism present in the writings and activities of many early leaders. No one embraced Christian nationalism more than Walter Scott. As Harrell writes of the nationalism exhibited by Walter Scott, "he believed that the millennium would begin when the 'ancient gospel' had purified all the governments and all the societies of the world and that the United States as the 'first of the Messianic nations,' had already passed through this transformation."<sup>2</sup> This American-focused millennialism also expressed itself in racist opinions, such as the belief expressed by Alexander Campbell that this was to be an Anglo-Saxon Millennium. Campbell's attempt to combine racism and millennial faith can be seen in this word from an essay in the *Millennial Harbinger* (1852): "In our country's destiny is involved the destiny of Protestantism and in its destiny the destiny of the nations of the world. God has given, in awful charge, to Protestant England and Protestant America—the Anglo-Saxon race—the fortunes, not of Christendom only, but all of the world." Harrell comments that the "millennialistic triumph of freedom and pure religion was to be accomplished in God's providence by Protestantism, America, and the white man."<sup>3</sup>

I chose to preface my comments about Whitehead's important look at *American Idolatry* because it is important that if Disciples are to condemn Christian nationalism we acknowledge our Movement's, and its leaders', complicity in the development of this ideology. We as a movement have not been immune from embracing Christian Nationalism, which is, as we can see, not a new phenomenon.

The author of *American Idolatry*, as I noted above was the Ainslie-Reed Lecturer at the 2023 General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada. Besides being the author of this book, he holds a Ph.D. from Baylor University and serves as an associate professor of sociology at Indiana University—Purdue University Indianapolis. He co-directs the Association of Religion Data Archives at the Center for the Study of Religion and American Culture, which is housed at IUPUI. In addition, he is the coauthor with Samuel Perry of *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States*, which, according to Whitehead, stands in the background to this book. While he brings scholarly acumen to this conversation, which is demonstrated throughout, this is more than a scholarly analysis of a current phenomenon in American public life. He makes it clear from the beginning that he is by confession a Christian, and that he has "come to believe that in order to faithfully follow the teachings and example of Jesus of Nazareth, I must work to disentangle Christianity

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<sup>2</sup> David Edwin Harrell, *Quest for a Christian America: The Disciples of Christ and American Society to 1866*, (Nashville, TN: The Disciples of Christ Historical Society, 1966), p. 47.

<sup>3</sup> Harrell, *Quest*, p. 53.

from Christian nationalism. The two cannot coexist. I must serve one or the other” (p. xii). It is this commitment to following Jesus that provides a spiritual foundation for this book. While many claim that Christians are being persecuted because of their belief that the United States is founded on Christian principles, Whitehead wants to make sure that we understand that this book cannot be construed as an attack on Christianity. In fact, he wants us to see this as a defense of the faith that is unsullied by the taint of American nationalism.

We need to remember that Whitehead does not intend for this book to serve as a scholarly analysis of Christian nationalism, something he offers in his book written with Samuel Perry. Instead, this is intended to be a book for a broad Christian audience that may be attracted to the ideology of Christian nationalism. With that in mind, Whitehead begins by identifying Christian nationalism as “A Hollow and Deceptive Philosophy” (Chapter 1). It is here that Whitehead tells his own story of growing up in small-town rural America, as an evangelical Christian, who imbibed a form of Christian nationalism symbolized by the presence of two flags standing at the front of the church, one American and one Christian. Of course, this is a reality shared with many if not most Mainline Protestant congregations (including Disciples congregations). In this opening chapter, besides sharing his own story, Whitehead seeks to answer the question of the nature of the Gospel. He raises this question because he believes Christian nationalism is a threat to the Gospel, which envisions salvation communally and extends to the entire creation. Thus, it undermines the Gospel through its embrace of racial inequality and xenophobia. With that in mind, he shares that his goal here is to invite us to start confronting white Christian nationalism.

In Chapter 2, Whitehead addresses the question “What Is Christian Nationalism?” You will note the modifier of “white” that Whitehead attaches to his discussion of Christian nationalism. He does this because no matter the race/ethnicity of those who embrace Christian nationalism, this ideology is designed to benefit white American Christians. So, his definition suggests that it is “a cultural framework that idealizes and advocates for a fusion of a particular expression of Christianity with American civic life” (p. 28). In other words, it seeks to enforce a version of conservative, moralistic, Christianity that seeks to uphold traditional social hierarchies. It also embraces forms of authoritarian social control as well as strict social/cultural boundaries that carry the vision of the ideal persons being those who are white, native-born citizens. In other words, the ideal American is not a foreign-born immigrant who is not white. It also privileges political conservatism. Again, some of the evidence of Christian nationalism highlighted here will include symbols present in many Disciples churches, including the displaying of the United States flag and celebratory services at the Fourth of July, but it might also include fearful messages from the pulpit that use coded language of Christian nationalism. Other examples of Christian nationalism include seeking access to political power, as well as a focus on fear, an us-versus-them thinking, comfort with violence (see January 6<sup>th</sup>), and of course an ever-present nostalgia for the “Good Old Days” (1950s into early 1960s), a supposed age of innocence that many of my friends speak

fondly of on social media. As we think about these things, we must ask whether nationalism is the same thing as patriotism. The answer is no. One can be a Christian and patriotic and not be a Christian nationalist. A patriot, unlike a Christian nationalist, is willing to tell the truth about the nation's history and work for a better future. While Christian nationalism might seem benign, there is clear evidence that it is dangerous. The January 6<sup>th</sup> insurrection is a good reminder of that danger.

In Chapter 3, Whitehead continues the conversation by focusing on the pursuit of power that is present within Christian nationalism. He titles the chapter "Turn the Other Cheek?" The reason he chose this title is that many Christian nationalists have rejected this part of Jesus' message. We see this rejection of such teachings of Jesus in the messages shared by politicians such as Donald Trump, but also from many pulpits. What we know as the Christian Right, a movement that has been embodied in people like Jerry Falwell and James Dobson, has made gaining access to political power a priority. This quest for power tends to be self-interested in that it seeks to protect the place of white conservative Christians in society. Thus, when the defense of religious liberty is called for, it is self-interested and generally doesn't include religious liberty for everyone. We see this in the desire for Christian prayers at schools, while seeking to ban elements of non-Christian experiences, such as calls to ban "sharia." So, here Whitehead calls on readers to confront the idol of self-interested power over other groups. Instead, he invites us to leverage whatever power we might have to benefit those on the margins.

One of the elements that Whitehead identifies as an expression of Christian nationalism is fear. It is a message regularly preached by purveyors of nationalism, especially the fear of the other. In response, Whitehead uses Chapter 4 to argue for the opposite. This chapter is titled "Do Not Be Afraid?" As we have seen in recent years Donald Trump has been an especially effective utilizer of fear, which has drawn in Christian nationalist support. Those fears include mourning the decline of Christianity in the United States, as well as racial fears, and fear of immigrants, which brings with it the increasing presence of non-Christian religions. Think of the messages that speak of invasions, infestations, and a perceived loss of true American culture. That is, there is the fear of being replaced by the "other." He notes that focusing on fear makes us bad neighbors, which keeps us from living our calling as Christians. Thus, he writes: "We cannot embrace a nationalist vision of Christianity that desires control and dominion over others when Jesus came to liberate all so we could freely love all" (p. 103).

Chapter 5, titled "Lay Down Your Sword?", begins with a quote from Rep. Lauren Boebert, which addresses claims that Jesus didn't need an AR-15, so how many does one need? She answers that "he didn't have enough to keep his government from killing him" (p. 105). Such a perspective sounds strangely unlike Jesus. The question here has to do with our attitudes toward war and violence. One need not be a pacifist to know that idolizing violence is contrary to the Gospel. Christian nationalists, on the other hand, tend to believe that violence at a national level is necessary to bring about God's

plan. We see this historically in the justifications offered for wars against Native Americans as part of the European expansion in the Americas. We've embraced war as the key to extending American values such as the spread of democracy. But it is not just the justification of war that is at issue here. Christian nationalism has been linked to using violence to uphold such things as the racial order (think here of the KKK). We see conservative Christians also embracing the death penalty, which disproportionately affects non-whites. Ultimately, the question here is how Jesus understood violence, especially in pursuit of power, and how that vision influences our perspective on violence. Jesus' vision of power stands in stark contrast with that of white Christian nationalism, which, in Whitehead's words, "teaches that the only way to protect Christianity is to protect the United States. And the only way to ensure that nation of this world continues to exist is to exert the power of the sword" (p. 127). As for Jesus, he "was clear on the day of his death that his kingdom is not of this world and does not depend on violence for its defense or expansion (John 18:36). He refused to pick up the sword and rather chose to take up a cross—the violent instrument of *his own* death, not that of his enemies" (p. 128).

The title of Chapter 6 draws on a phrase from the Lord's Prayer: "May Your Kingdom Come, on Earth as It Is in Heaven." In this chapter, Whitehead addresses the Christian nationalist message that the United States is God's favored nation and that it needs to gain global dominance. The way for this to happen was for conservative Christians to take control of the levers of power so that they could enforce their moral vision that involved opposition to abortion, homosexuality, and divorce (isn't it interesting that we're witnessing a spat of divorces on the part of Christian nationalists—think Marjorie Taylor Green and Lauren Boebert—as well as its embrace as its near messiah, the twice divorced, thrice-married, Donald Trump, Sr. But earlier on it was expressed through opposition to the Civil Rights movement and such concerns as intermarriage. The emphasis here is in part on the embrace of racism by white Christians. Might not the current opposition to "wokeness" and "critical race theory" by conservative Christians be an expression of that strain of racism within white Christian nationalism?

If we're to love our neighbors, as Jesus declared, then "Who Is My Neighbor?" (Chapter 7). If the previous chapter focused on racial and economic equality, in this chapter Whitehead addresses the current fear among many Christian nationalists of immigrants and refugees. Since protecting cultural power is central to nationalism, it stands to reason that immigrants from places other than perhaps northern Europe would be problematic. Even though the Bible calls for the protection of refugees, there is strong opposition to just such protection. Thus, many white Christians are embracing what is called the Great Replacement Theory. Whitehead uses this chapter to expose this hypocrisy and offer an alternative. He reminds us that "the Savior we worship was a Middle Eastern man who lived as a religious minority and whose family members were once refugees" (p. 177).

The final chapter of *American Idolatry* is titled "Remaking American Christianity." In this

chapter (Chapter 8), Whitehead invites us to recalibrate our Christianity by rejecting Christian nationalism and embracing the way of Jesus. Thus, while Christian nationalism “leaves only death and destruction in its wake” and fails to encourage abundant life, we can turn away from that version of Christianity and embrace a “Christianity in which all image-bearers flourish and find love, liberation, and abundant life” (p. 182). This vision of Christian life rejects the call to seek our own good at the expense of the other by idolizing power, violence, and fear. The goal here is to help the readers become aware of the contrast between Christian nationalism and the Gospel. By doing this we will be prepared to enter the public square as Christians seeking the good of all and not just our own good. As he closes the book, he notes that he has been told that hope is a spiritual discipline. Therefore, “when facing a chasm of the unknown, a darkness, it is so easy to let fear grip us and allow despair to take hold. It is important we face the darkness, feel the despair, and clearly declare all is not as it should be. Only then can we begin to imagine something new. Only then can we begin to hope, to commit to living as though a different future is truly possible” (p. 191).

As I shared at the beginning of this review, I was asked to approach Whitehead’s book from a Disciples’ perspective, which is why I began with the sense-of-the-assembly resolution calling on Disciples across congregations, regions, and the general church, both in the United States and Canada (it’s important to remember that this denomination is bi-national and that Christian nationalism exists in Canada as well as in the United States). I also wanted to take note of the presence of nationalism, rooted to a great extent in a postmillennialism that expressed itself in the ideology of Manifest Destiny, which is present within the Stone-Campbell tradition. It might be an ideology embraced by the religious right, but it is present in our churches even today. In *American Idolatry*, Whitehead helps us discern its presence and our own complicity so that we might confess our sin and seek to embrace a different future that is more in line with the way of Jesus. Readers will likely find some of what Whitehead reveals here unsettling, but it is an important word for a time when the larger Christian community is struggling to discern how to be faithful to the Gospel in a world that is increasingly cynical about institutional Christianity.