



BAPTIZING AMERICA

How Mainline Protestants Helped
Build Christian Nationalism

Small Group Study Guide

by **Brian Kaylor**
& **Beau Underwood**

Chapter 1 — How Firm a Foundation

Terms like “Christian Nationalism” and “mainline Protestant” are often used without clear definitions. This chapter identifies key terms, provides examples that clearly illustrate the problem, and offers a road map for the rest of the book.

1. How do you define Christian Nationalism in your own words? How do you explain the difference between patriotism and Christian Nationalism?
2. Before encountering this book, how familiar were you with the topic of Christian Nationalism? Do you see particular events differently after reading this chapter?
3. What are you most excited to talk about as you anticipate the rest of the book? Why does this subject matter to you personally?

Chapter 2 — A Heretical Faith

Christian Nationalism conflicts with core tenets of the Christian faith. By transforming countries into idols, it prevents faithful engagement by followers of Jesus in the public square. By devaluing people created in the image of God, it distorts the relationships we have with our neighbors — and thus with God.

1. When does patriotism turn into idolatry? What is the duty of a Christian or a church when that occurs?
2. What resources or ideas — beyond those mentioned in this chapter — might Christian faith offer to counter Christian Nationalism?
3. This chapter highlights historical and contemporary opposition to Christian Nationalism by a number of prominent Christian leaders. Which of them did you find most compelling and why?

Chapter 3 — (Un)Civil Religion

In sociology, the concept of civil religion describes how people can be united around experiences, rituals, and beliefs. This experience of transcendence is rooted in a common life, rather than devotion to God or adherence to a particular creed. It has often been portrayed as serving a positive role by giving people a sense of shared meaning and purpose. This chapter argues this faith in civil religion is misguided and serves as a gateway into Christian Nationalism.

1. Based on reading chapter 1 and chapter 2, how would you distinguish between civil religion and Christian Nationalism?
2. When have you seen civil religion inadvertently serving the cause of Christian Nationalism?
3. How might practices of civil religion be less than fully inclusive? How are the people excluded likely to be perceived by others? What does that mean in a democracy where equality is a foundational commitment?

Chapter 4 — Prayer Time

While we are called as Christians to pray — even “without ceasing” (1 Thessalonians 5:17) — Jesus also taught his disciples to pray in their closets and not seek public attention for their petitions. There is a place for corporate prayer in worship, but that does not function the same in a civic setting that is not a gathered community of believers.

1. Many government meetings open with prayers. Does your local city council open with prayer? How do they pick who prays? And what message might the prayers send to people in your community?
2. What are things that could make public prayers at government events more acceptable, and what could make them more problematic (e.g., who prays, what’s said, etc.)?
3. What are healthy ways to pray for our nation in church settings, as opposed to at government events?

Chapter 5 — One Nation ... Indivisible

A key aspect of Christian Nationalism is the belief that the U.S. was founded to be a Christian nation and that it should be governed as one today. The idea of the U.S. as a nation “under God” remains potent today as politicians and parties routinely embrace this notion.

1. Should “under God” be in the Pledge of Allegiance? How do you interpret the reference to “God” in the Pledge?
2. Some Christians don’t say the Pledge of Allegiance at all because they argue theologically we can only give our allegiance to God. Do you recite the Pledge? Why or why not?
3. This chapter includes a historical review of clergy talking about the vision of the U.S. being a nation “under God,” which is language still commonly used today. While this is problematic when we attempt to establish it through governmental decree, what are healthier ways of seeking a nation where more people follow God?

Chapter 6 — In God We Trust?

Efforts to make the U.S. officially a Christian nation often are tied to times of war. During conflicts, we often mix God in with the rallying-around-the-flag emotions. Additionally, Christian Nationalism can fuel pro-war sentiments. It’s a symbiotic relationship.

1. What are your thoughts about “In God We Trust” on our money and as our national motto?
2. Think of ways you’ve seen God and the Bible invoked to justify wars. How did it make you feel? How do you feel today about blessing calls for war?
3. How can our worship services and Bible studies push back against baptizing every war as a crusade for God?

Chapter 7 — Seeking a Blessing

In courting political influence and seeking validation from those in power, churches find themselves in a compromised position. While this tension has become much more obvious in recent years, historical anecdotes reveal its prevalence throughout U.S. history. It's a past we need to understand or risk its constant repetition.

1. Were you familiar with any of the historical episodes described in this chapter? Which moment most surprised you?
2. Has your own congregation or faith community ever experienced a tension between the desire for public influence and the need to protect its religious integrity? How did it manage that conflict (or how do you think it would)?
3. Why do you think Christian leaders and communities of all stripes are so susceptible to the temptation to become “priests of American culture rather than proclaimers of the gospel”?

Chapter 8 — Worshiping America

Worship forms us. The words of the songs we sing, the prayers we utter, and the liturgies we participate in don't just rise to the heavens; they lodge inside of us. In many congregations, music even teaches theology more consistently and effectively than sermons. Thus, it's important to consider the impact of how we worship.

1. Where does nationalism show up in the songs and liturgies used in your church? And how do alternative messages about a global faith show up?
2. How does your church deal with Sundays close to patriotic holidays like the Fourth of July and Memorial Day? If such services include patriotic moments, what would it mean to remove those elements?
3. What are some ways you can celebrate national holidays like the Fourth of July elsewhere that would not be appropriate in church (besides shooting off fireworks)?

Chapter 9 — A Banner Decision

Perhaps no patriotic or nationalistic issue causes more controversies in churches than calls to remove the American flag. While the presence of a flag may seem natural and just the way things are, in most churches and traditions the practice doesn't actually go back very far. Just a couple of generations ago, it would have been unusual.

1. Does your church have an American flag? When and why was it added?
2. If your church has an American flag, think about where it sits and the messages it sends in that space. How is it placed in relationship with a Christian flag, a cross, or other important symbols?
3. Several pastors have lost their jobs for moving or removing an American flag. What does that tell us about Christian Nationalism and the way the flag impacts how we view our faith?

Chapter 10 — Failed State

In denying church-state separation, Christian Nationalism erodes democracy by arguing certain voices should be privileged and others denigrated when it comes to political and social power. This chapter demonstrates how that has occurred and offers a Christian defense of democracy.

1. In what ways have you seen the separation of church and state violated by political actors? How do you feel when those institutions become mutually reinforcing?
2. How does a healthy distance between religious bodies and government authority protect them both?
3. As a Christian, what arguments can you make in defense of democracy?

Chapter 11 — Failed Church

Christian Nationalism threatens democracy. Even more concerning, it's a threat to the Christian witness. As this chapter highlights, Christian Nationalism can distort the gospel to the point of almost creating a new religion. Such heresies require pushback.

1. What stood out the most about the ReAwaken America Tour, and why?
2. Have you attended a church service or event that you felt included too much nationalism or partisanship? What was it like and how did it make you feel?
3. Younger generations are leaving churches, and fewer are identifying as Christian. What role do you think politics has played in this trend? How can your church offer an alternative witness?

Chapter 12 — Moving Forward

This chapter cautions us against making two mistakes: (1) creating a false dichotomy of “us” versus “them” that demonizes the other and lets ourselves off the hook, and (2) naming a problem without identifying practical ways to respond. We need to talk about Christian Nationalism in constructive ways and take what actions we can to address it.

1. How do we create places and conversations where “conversion” away from Christian Nationalism becomes possible? How do we name our own complicity in this sin? How do we recognize the humanity of others who we see perpetuating it as well?
2. What work does your own congregation/community need to do internally to address Christian Nationalism? What does a healthy process for conversation on this topic look like?
3. Are there other places where you have influence and could raise this subject? Who might be open to engaging with you and what message would you want them to hear?