

**A Time to Keep, A Time to Throw Away:
Preaching and White Christian Nationalism**

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Abstract: *As white Christian nationalism takes center stage in American politics and the second Trump administration, preachers and church leaders find themselves disoriented and concerned about what this means for the church and the nation. Through sociological, historical, theological, and homiletical perspectives on white Christian nationalism and its antecedents in U.S. history and culture, this article offers a starting point for interpreting the present moment of uncertainty and volatility. The article considers related themes such as American exceptionalism, the American rhetorical “jeremiad,” and civil religion that reflect cultural and social myths that can hamper prophetic and authentic preaching and even Christian discipleship, and suggests what preachers might “keep” and “throw-away” in their preaching and leadership.*

Introduction

My brother-in-law David has an ongoing conundrum. An “evangelical” pastor, David lives and works in contexts that have become more socially and politically conservative than he is—which is to say, he does not support the policies, rhetoric, or values of “Trumpism.” His commitment to evangelicalism has been put to the test as words like “evangelical” have come to mean something he does not believe—so much so that he has given up that label for himself. After receiving backlash for calling evangelical peers toward more generous, compassionate, and Christlike approaches to immigration, racism, and economic justice, he had all but given up posting on Facebook. Since the second inauguration of President Trump, however, David can no longer hold his tongue, God bless him. His posts of lament and fear and hope and compassion have returned, backlash be damned.

David is not the only one struggling with the shifting tides of “evangelicalism” and the melding of conservative Christianity with ardent support for Donald Trump. A tidal wave of books, think pieces, and podcasts dissecting these trends has been flooding the public sphere for at least a decade.¹ Studies of the first Trump administration show that 16 percent of white Trump supporters who were not evangelical in 2016 began to identify as evangelical or born again by

¹ For example: Kristin Kobes Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation* (New York, NY: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2020); David Brooks, “The Dissenters Trying to Save Evangelicalism From Itself,” *The New York Times*, February 4, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/04/opinion/evangelicalism-division-renewal.html>; “How Support for Trump Is Causing a Rift in the Evangelical Church,” *NPR*, November 29, 2023, <https://www.npr.org/2023/11/29/1215806967/how-support-for-trump-is-causing-a-rift-in-the-evangelical-church>; Tim Alberta, *The Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory: American Evangelicals in an Age of Extremism* (New York, NY: Harper, 2023); Peter Smith, “Jesus Is Their Savior, Trump Is Their Candidate,” *AP News*, May 18, 2024, sec. Religion, <https://apnews.com/article/trump-christian-evangelicals-conservatives-2024-election-43f25118c133170c77786daf316821c3>; Peter Wehner, “Evangelicals Made a Bad Trade,” *The Atlantic*, January 24, 2025, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2025/01/evangelicals-trump/681450/>; Stephanie McCrummen, “Army of God,” *Atlantic Monthly* (Atlantic Media Group, LLC, February 1, 2025); Brad Onishi and Dan Miller, “Straight White American Jesus Podcast,” accessed February 21, 2025, <https://www.straightwhiteamericanjesus.com/>.

2020 (compared to only 1 percent of non-supporters).² Simultaneously, by 2019, about 50 percent of self-identified, politically conservative evangelicals said they never go to church, up from about a third in 2008. As political scientist and Baptist pastor Ryan Burge put it in 2021, “Now, the data indicate that more and more Americans are conflating evangelicalism with Republicanism—and melding two forces to create a movement that is not entirely about politics or religion but power.”³ As I was writing this article, Pope Francis issued a letter to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in which he criticized U.S. policies of mass deportation and directly refuted theological claims made by Vice President JD Vance, who is Catholic. What “evangelical,” “Catholic,” or even “Christian” means in the United States seems more disorienting by the day.

The early months of 2025 find the United States in a significant moment of uncertainty, instability, and crisis. Many of us who lead and guide Christian communities and institutions feel unmoored as our congregations react to national events and as we witness the confusing and alarming ways in which Christianity is being used and coopted in cultural and political spheres. Often at the center of the discussion is the rise of white Christian nationalism, both as a movement and as a demonstration of the distortions of Christianity in U.S. society. This article attempts to assess some of the implications of white Christian nationalism for preaching and homiletics by examining what it is and is not and by understanding some factors that have led to its current ascendancy.

Because the consequences of white Christian nationalism have varying impacts on different people and groups, I begin by naming my own social location. I am a cishet white woman, a U.S. citizen, an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church (USA), through whose institutions I received most of my education; I have a PhD from an elite institution (Vanderbilt University); I have no major health issues or conditions; I have no children (but do have a cat); and I am married to a Presbyterian minister who is the head of staff at an established, relatively healthy, and financially stable congregation in Louisville, Kentucky. Thus far, I am not at the top of any list of “enemies” of white Christian nationalists or the federal government.

I would guess that a majority of *Homiletic* readers also are not at the top of white Christian nationalist target lists—not yet, anyway. Readers who are persons of color and/or immigrants, members of the LGBTQIA+ community, and others who are vulnerable in various ways may rightly feel more at risk. For all of us, though, social location and cultural identification are important considerations in our response to white Christian nationalism, especially as the meaning of the very words we use to describe ourselves—such as “Christian”—continues to shift. For those of us in (typically white) mainline denominations whose traditions have enjoyed forms of cultural power and influence, attention to our identity is of particular relevance as we examine white Christian nationalism.

Homiletic has many readers outside of the United States. My focus here is on U.S. history and identity, and is addressed first and foremost to the U.S. context. This is not incidental. Rather, I believe the U.S. Christian community needs to attend closely to these matters precisely because of our influence abroad and because of our often myopic and self-absorbed orientation

² Gregory A. Smith, “More White Americans Adopted than Shed Evangelical Label during Trump Presidency, Especially His Supporters,” September 15, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/09/15/more-white-americans-adopted-than-shed-evangelical-label-during-trump-presidency-especially-his-supporters/>.

³ Ryan Burge, “Opinion | Why ‘Evangelical’ Is Becoming Another Word for ‘Republican,’” *The New York Times*, October 26, 2021, sec. Opinion, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/26/opinion/evangelical-republican.html>.

toward Christian identity throughout our national history. I am grateful for those beyond the borders of the United States who help us see ourselves more clearly, and I look forward to further transnational and intercultural conversation.

In what follows, I bring together elements from sociology, history, theology, and homiletics to craft an understanding of white Christian nationalism in the United States, along with some of its historical roots and expressions, and pose contemporary implications for preachers and the American Christian church. Everything is changing rapidly, making these conversations disorienting as the ground shifts under our feet. I draw wisdom from Ecclesiastes 3:6, where there is a season and a time for everything under heaven—and in this time, I propose we assess what remains ours to keep and what it is time to throw away.

Framing White Christian Nationalism

Despite common usage, the phrase “white Christian nationalism” does not lend itself to a simple definition. None of the words “*white*,” “*Christian*,” or “*nationalism*” can be taken at face value; behind each lies a cluster of beliefs and ideologies traceable through U.S. history and made new in the 21st century.

First, what do we mean by *Christian nationalism*? At a basic level, Christian nationalism prioritizes and privileges a form of Christianity as a central component of American identity. The Christians Against Christian Nationalism movement, organized by the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, states, “Christian nationalism seeks to merge Christian and American identities, distorting both the Christian faith and America’s constitutional democracy. Christian nationalism demands Christianity be privileged by the State and implies that to be a good American, one must be Christian.”⁴

What is meant by “Christian,” however, is not easy to pin down. While certain theological beliefs may align with Christian nationalist ideology, correlation and causation are less obvious. In *Taking America Back for God*, sociologists Andrew Whitehead and Samuel Perry describe Christian nationalism as “an ideology that idealizes and advocates a fusion of American civic life with a particular type of Christian identity and culture,” specifically ideological beliefs about historical identity, cultural preeminence, and political influence.⁵ The primary interests of Christian nationalists are political rather than religious, which is why the attitudes and activities of Christian nationalism often appear fundamentally opposed to traditional or even conservative Christian ethical commitments.⁶ According to Whitehead and Perry, in sociological terms, “a commitment to Christian nationalism is not in any way similar to ‘religious commitment.’”⁷ Importantly, Whitehead and Perry summarily reject the assumption that “evangelical” is synonymous with Christian nationalism, despite how these words may be used in popular culture:

Christian nationalism is a framework that orients Americans' perspectives on national identity, belonging, and social hierarchies. American evangelicalism, strictly speaking, is a theological tradition prioritizing certain doctrinal commitments, including biblical

⁴ “Statement from Christians Against Christian Nationalism,” accessed February 13, 2025, <https://www.christiansagainstdchristiannationalism.org/statement>.

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

⁶ Whitehead and Perry, *Taking America Back for God*, Ch. 2, Power.

⁷ Whitehead and Perry, *Taking America Back for God*, Introduction.

inerrancy and conversionism. While a large percentage of Christian nationalists are affiliated with evangelical Protestant denominations and hold characteristically evangelical beliefs, many non-evangelicals (or non-Christians, for that matter) also hold strong Christian nationalist beliefs. Conversely, many white evangelicals in surveys unequivocally reject Christian nationalism.⁸

Beyond a general desire to merge a form of Christianity with American identity, what beliefs distinguish Christian nationalism? In *The Flag and the Cross*, Perry and another sociologist, Philip Gorski, outline seven “indicators” that together serve as markers for American Christian nationalism. Each demonstrates an understanding of the relationship between “Christianity” and the identity and purpose of the United States. Gorski and Perry measure overall agreement with these statements (or disagreement, in the case of #5) to assess the strength of Christian nationalist belief:

1. I consider the founding documents like the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution to be divinely inspired.
2. The success of the United States is part of God’s plan.
3. The federal government should declare the United States a Christian nation.
4. The federal government should advocate Christian values.
5. The federal government should enforce a strict separation of church and state.
6. The federal government should allow the display of religious symbols in public spaces.
7. The federal government should allow prayer in public schools.⁹

Gorski and Perry provide an extended explanation as to why these indicators are useful for measuring and interpreting Christian nationalism. For the purposes of this article, it will suffice to note that Christian nationalists are concerned with things like whether God has a special relationship with the United States, how U.S. history is interpreted in relationship to Christianity, and what kinds of policies the federal government should enact. Perhaps tellingly, these indicators suggest little in the way of Christian theology or doctrine.

Given this basic framework for Christian nationalism, what do we mean by *white* Christian nationalism? Gorski and Perry’s work seeks to answer that question through demographic interpretation of the data. When analyzed alongside racial markers, Christian nationalist indicators do not merely designate conservative political viewpoints but strongly correlate with ultra-conservative beliefs *held by white Americans in particular*. In other words, while Americans of various racial and ethnic backgrounds may affirm elements of Christian nationalism, the strength of Christian nationalist indicators correlates with racist white beliefs, such as that white Americans face more discrimination than Black Americans. Thus:

Indicators of Christian nationalism. . . are powerful predictors of ultra-conservatism for white Americans, especially on any issues involving race, discrimination, xenophobia, or

⁸ Whitehead and Perry, *Taking America Back for God*, Preface.

⁹ Philip S. Gorski and Samuel L. Perry, *The Flag and the Cross: White Christian Nationalism and the Threat to American Democracy* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2022), 15–16.

justice. . . Whiteness is the hidden link that transforms the deep story of Christian nationalism into a political vision.¹⁰

The concepts of “whiteness” and “Christian” thus converge to define what counts as “American.” In fact, the distinctions between these terms are blurred in white Christian nationalism; as Gorski and Perry put it, “At issue is not just religious nostalgia or even religious conservatism, as if such things transcended ethnic and racial identities. Rather, it is an acute strain of ethno-traditionalism in which ‘white’ and ‘Christian’ are conflated into a single identity—‘white-Christian.’”¹¹

The “deep story” of Christian nationalism preserves identity and beliefs in which white American Christians are the only ones worthy to receive the full benefits of being American. “Whiteness” has long symbolized goodness and righteousness, especially in triumphalist narratives of American history, as conveyed by “City on a Hill” or “manifest destiny” visions of success, blessing, and strength. The white narrative can also be that of persecution, in which the purity and virtue of white Christian America have been “polluted” and its success and prosperity stolen by “outsiders” who are undeserving of its benefits.¹² Either way, heroic or persecuted, within white Christian nationalism, whiteness remains the defining measure of American-Christian purity and “worthiness.”¹³

Because the deep story of white-Christian identity centers on who counts as a real Americans (namely, “good people like us”), this identity and its benefits must be protected.¹⁴ “Liberty,” therefore, translates to the authority and freedom to exercise control over “others” (everyone else) through violence when necessary. Within this framework, “others” are seen as savage, disorderly, sinful, uncivilized, and dangerous by nature. The rhetoric of “freedom” and “order” signifies a patriarchal and racial hierarchy of power, authority, and dominance, specifically that of “(white) men exercising (righteous) violence to defend (their) freedom and

¹⁰ Gorski and Perry, *The Flag and the Cross*, 22.

¹¹ Gorski and Perry, *The Flag and the Cross*, 27.

¹² Gorski and Perry, *The Flag and the Cross*, 110–12.

¹³ A clear example of this ideology currently being executed is the purge of “Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion” efforts in the federal government, initiated by executive order on January 20, 2025, entitled “Ending Radical And Wasteful Government DEI Programs And Preferencing” (The White House, “Ending Radical And Wasteful Government DEI Programs And Preferencing” (2025), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/ending-radical-and-wasteful-government-dei-programs-and-preferencing/>). While the order is vague about what constitutes a “DEI” program, later governmental instructions were more specific. For instance, the Department of Defense claimed that “DEI content includes but is not limited to information that promotes programs, concepts, or materials about critical race theory, gender ideology, and preferential treatment or quotas based upon sex, race or ethnicity, or other DEI related matters with respect to promotion and selection reform, advisory boards, councils or working groups. Content requiring removal also includes that which is counter to merit-based or color-blind policies (e.g. articles that focus on immutable characteristics, such as race, ethnicity, or sex) or promotes cultural awareness months as outlined in Secretary Hegseth’s January 31, 2025, Memorandum, ‘Identity Months Dead at DoD’” (Sean Parnell, “Digital Content Refresh Memo,” Department of Defense, February 26, 2025, <https://media.defense.gov/2025/Feb/27/2003652943/-1/-1/1/DIGITAL-CONTENT-REFRESH.PDF>). This DoD order led the department to flag more than 26,000 images for removal from its website (a number that may increase to more than 100,000), including some recognizing war heroes who happened to be persons of color or women, or even had the name “Gay” (The Associated Press, “War Heroes Are among 26,000 Images Flagged for Removal in Pentagon’s DEI Purge,” *NPR*, March 7, 2025, sec. Race, <https://www.npr.org/2025/03/07/nx-s1-5321003/pentagon-images-flagged-removal-dei-purge-trump>).

¹⁴ Gorski and Perry, *The Flag and the Cross*, 96.

impose (racial and gender) order.”¹⁵ Because white Christian nationalists believe themselves to be the only worthy, true Americans whose actions are righteous and pure, their “freedoms” must be protected at the expense of others, their “values” privileged over the beliefs of others, and their violence blessed in the name of “order” over the disorder of others. Violence is justified in the pursuit of “freedom” and the protection of righteous order, hierarchy, and power.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to explore the causes for the current surge in white Christian nationalism, though sociologists cite the recent decline in the U.S. Christian population (and thereby Christian dominance over cultural and social norms) as one reason some portions of the U.S. public have come to support Christian nationalist ideology.¹⁶ Perceived threats to cultural and social power can also draw white Christians toward Christian nationalism as a way to maintain status, control, and dominance in a changing nation.¹⁷ Regardless, the underlying beliefs of white Christian nationalism are not novel. Perry and Gorski name four significant moments in U.S. history where “the dream of racial equality was sacrificed on the altar of (white) national unity”: in the 17th century, when white “chosenness” and domination overtook the possibility of coexistence with native peoples and sanctioned enslavement of kidnapped Africans in the American colonies; in the 18th century, when the founders of the United States chose “unity” over enshrining actual equality in the Constitution; after Reconstruction, when the Civil War was recast as a war of states’ rights and segregation was sanctioned and institutionalized; and after the Civil Rights Movement of the 20th century, when white conservatives resisted integration under the guise of religious freedom, recast racism as an individual rather than systemic issue, and embraced libertarianism.¹⁸ For Gorski and Perry, the United States again finds itself at a crossroads: a path toward a multiracial democracy or a path toward continued and intensified white supremacy and domination.¹⁹ Historians, sociologists, theologians, and philosophers would tell us the nation has been at a crossroads like this before, and the future is not yet written.²⁰ But the path we take may depend significantly on what we choose to keep hold of at this moment and what we are willing to let go of and throw away.

Exceptionalism and the American “Jeremiad”

In 2020, saving the “soul of America” was a constant refrain from Democrats and Republicans alike as they battled over whose values would win the national election. Again, before the midterm elections in 2022, President Joe Biden gave a speech on “The Continued

¹⁵ Gorski and Perry, *The Flag and the Cross*, 89. Parentheses in original.

¹⁶ Whitehead and Perry, *Taking America Back for God*, Chapter 1.

¹⁷ Whitehead and Perry, *Taking America Back for God*, Chapter 1.

¹⁸ Gorski and Perry, *The Flag and the Cross*, Chapter 2. For more on these moments in U.S. history, including a deeper analysis of theological shifts undergirding them, see (among others) Whitehead and Perry, *Taking America Back for God*; Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne*; Alberta, *The Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory*; Andrew Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

¹⁹ Gorski and Perry, *The Flag and the Cross*, 129.

²⁰ In a Substack post on April 9, 2025, American historian Heather Cox Richardson offers a clear and concise summary of this reality at the end of the Civil War, which had been fought over the question of whether or not “all men were created equal.” See Heather Cox Richardson, “April 9, 2025 (Wednesday),” Substack newsletter, *Letters from an American* (blog), April 10, 2025, <https://heathercoxrichardson.substack.com/p/april-9-2025-wednesday>.

Battle for the Soul of the Nation.”²¹ Then, in his farewell address in January 2025, President Biden said:

The Statue of Liberty is. . . an enduring symbol of the soul of our nation, a soul shaped by forces that bring us together and by forces that pull us apart. And yet, through good times and tough times, we have withstood it all. A nation of pioneers and explorers, of dreamers and doers, of ancestors native to this land, of ancestors who came by force. A nation of immigrants who came to build a better life. A nation holding the torch of *the most powerful idea ever in the history of the world: that all of us, all of us are created equal. That all of us deserve to be treated with dignity, justice and fairness.*²²

For Biden, the soul of the nation is intrinsically connected to the maintenance and expansion of equality, justice, and fairness, which he believed could only be accomplished through a multiracial democracy.²³ He echoed Thomas Jefferson and many others in deliberately asserting human equality as a distinctly American value.

Biden also did something else: he claimed, not for the first time, that the idea that all people are created equal is not merely foundational to America but makes the United States *unequaled in the history of the world*. Special. Exceptional.

That the United States is set apart for (or because of its) greatness is not a belief held by only one party, nor is it unique to this moment.²⁴ Especially in public speech, articulations of American exceptionalism have long been at the center of U.S. self-understanding. Since early colonization, Americans have asserted that the nation was chosen by God and given a specific destiny to fulfill.²⁵ As evinced in Biden’s speech, “The idea that America is a unique nation—an exceptional nation—set apart and qualitatively different from, even superior to, the rest of the world is alive and well.”²⁶

American rhetoric, especially political and religious speech, has been strongly influenced by the *American jeremiad*, a political sermon form that emerged from New England Puritans in the 17th century. Generally speaking, a jeremiad (named for the biblical prophet Jeremiah) was a type of rhetorical address that decried the ways of the world, called out the sins of the people, and announced God’s impending wrath.²⁷ In Europe, it was a traditional sermon form from the medieval through Renaissance eras, in Catholic and Protestant settings, which was brought to the Americas by early Puritans. In the so-called “new world,” however, New England Puritans modernized the jeremiad to align with their experiences, re-envisioning the wrath of God as

²¹ Joe Biden, “Remarks by President Biden on the Continued Battle for the Soul of the Nation” (Philadelphia, September 1, 2022), <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/09/01/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-continued-battle-for-the-soul-of-the-nation/>.

²² Biden, “Farewell Address.” Emphasis mine.

²³ Interestingly, journalist Elizabeth Dias wrote in 2020 that rhetoric about the state of America’s soul has often been connected to the treatment of Black people, wherein the American “soul” is troubled or sick when it ignores the oppression it inflicts. This meaning seems to have been greatly diminished in recent years. Elizabeth Dias, “Biden and Trump Say They’re Fighting for America’s ‘Soul.’ What Does That Mean?,” *The New York Times*, October 17, 2020, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/17/us/biden-trump-soul-nation-country.html>.

²⁴ See Jon Meacham, *The Soul of America: The Battle for Our Better Angels*, eBook (New York, NY: Random House, 2018).

²⁵ John D. Wilsey, *American Exceptionalism and Civil Religion: Reassessing the History of an Idea* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 16.

²⁶ Wilsey, *American Exceptionalism and Civil Religion* 15.

²⁷ Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), 7.

corrective rather than destructive and laying claim to the special mission God had for New England to become the “new Jerusalem.”²⁸ Moreover, Puritans used crises they faced as a means to strengthen their resolve: “They took courage from backsliding, converted threat into vindication, made affliction their seal of progress. Crisis became both form and substance of their appeals.”²⁹ Because their cause was just and their destiny a divine mission, hardship could be endured—and, when overcome, be interpreted as a sign of progress.³⁰

Puritans understood themselves to be in a covenant agreement with God, and while the rhetorical jeremiad might indict them for the ways in which they had strayed from that covenant, it was in the end “a cosmically reassuring form of political and religious rhetoric precisely because it was firmly situated within the context of the national covenant.”³¹ The high standards to which the New Englanders were being held were a sign of God’s providence and particular care and love for them; judgment and favor were interconnected within the covenant framework. Further, a “blessed existence” in the next life and a “prosperous existence” were not either/or but were bound together as the fate of the burgeoning nation became infused with eternal significance.³² This evolution from judgment into consolation and from national success into fulfillment of divine purpose became the basis for the distinctly American form of the jeremiad.

In his 2012 book *American Dream 2.0: A Christian Way Out of the Great Recession*, Frank Thomas asserts that at the heart of the cultural myth of the United States is *an unshakeable optimism in the fundamental goodness of the American experiment*. While the theological framing of the early Puritan jeremiad has since been replaced with more generic forms of civil religion,³³ the key belief underlying the contemporary American jeremiad remains that:

²⁸ Bercovitch writes that for the Puritans, “The purpose of their jeremiads was to direct an imperiled people of God toward the fulfillment of their destiny, to guide them individually toward salvation, and collectively toward the American city of God.” Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad*, 8-9.

²⁹ Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad*, 62.

³⁰ A complete overview of these developments is beyond the scope of this paper. However, Bercovitch points out that by the last decades of the 18th century, the jeremiad was used to envision secular change as divine progress, including the justification of the Revolutionary War as the fulfillment of divine will (Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad*, 132–34). However, Bercovitch writes, tension remained between “rebellion” and “revolution”—specifically the libertarian impulses laid bare by rebellion against imperial power and the “revolutionary” forces seeking to maintain power in the hands of the propertied and educated elites. The fear that a “‘contagion of liberty’ become license had infected the body politic” led public leaders to seek to “tame” and “restrain” the selfish appetites of those “anarchists” and “mobs” who protested stratifications of power and wealth in the newly formed democracy. Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad*, 135-138.

³¹ Cathleen Kaveny, *Prophecy without Contempt: Religious Discourse in the Public Square* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2016), 177.

³² Kaveny, *Prophecy without Contempt*, 178. Over time, the image of a covenant between God and the Puritans shifted to a more ecumenical understanding of national “chosenness,” encompassing multiple Protestant traditions in the colonies. By the time of the Revolutionary War, the jeremiad was used not to indict those in the colonies (who by now had come to be seen as God’s “new Israel”) but the English and the Loyalists, now portrayed as “Assyrians” or “Babylonians.” The language of the biblical prophetic oracles against Israel’s enemies was extended to whoever opposed New Englanders and their pursuit of liberty. Kaveny, *Prophecy without Contempt*, 214–20.

³³ Kaveny points to the “generic-ness” of the American jeremiad today: “The Puritans balanced their belief that the American people were specially chosen for great privilege with the conviction that they were also called to great duties. Moreover, they were convinced that both privilege and duties were not a matter of entitlement or good luck but were conferred by God for His own purposes. In contrast, in our era, we have retained the idea of chosenness without any firm conception of a chooser. We have maintained the idea of national privilege but have not always sustained a clear sense of national duties. Our destiny is far from manifest. We think of ourselves as a shining city on a hill, but our view of the path from that august vantage is decidedly cloudy. Contemporary Americans may

Any looming challenge is only a test of character and not a fatal error or structural flaw in the American system. Any crisis may be overcome by a return to the optimism of traditional American ideals rather than the identification of fundamental and structural flaws in American values.³⁴

This quintessentially American form of the jeremiad asserts that though the nation may fall short of its calling to be the City on the Hill or the welcome port for those yearning to be free, *the fundamental values and structures upon which the nation was founded remain inerrant and unassailable*.³⁵ Over the centuries, the belief in America's "chosenness" and "set-apartness," coupled with an insistence on its exceptionalism, became the rhetorical expectation for public speeches and civic sermons, regardless of racial, religious, or party affiliations. Even the most pessimistic of political speeches, like Trump's 2016 inaugural speech remembered for its dire reference to "American carnage," follow the jeremiad (in that case, by proclaiming a return to a bygone era when America was "great," but never questioning the existence of greatness).³⁶

Thomas highlights the American jeremiad both as a reminder of how American exceptionalism became part of the public rhetorical (including homiletical) norms in the United States and because the American jeremiad has come to define what constitutes *acceptable public dissent* in American life. Simply put, in American public speech, it is acceptable to express dissatisfaction and a desire for national reform but unacceptable to challenge American exceptionalism or the unique, God-given destiny of the United States.³⁷

To illustrate the American jeremiad's power to dictate the bounds of political and religious rhetoric, Thomas analyzes sermons and speeches by Martin Luther King, Jr., Jeremiah Wright, and Barack Obama. In each, the speaker is responding to situations of injustice and a failure of the nation to live up to its ideals. Thomas first compares King's 1965 sermon, "Our God is Marching On" in Montgomery, Alabama, and his 1967 sermon, "Beyond Vietnam," at Riverside Church in New York City. In 1965, following the Selma March, King's message was realistic but hopeful, affirming the democratic ideals and possibilities for justice not yet realized—but coming soon. King employs the refrain, "How long? Not long." The overall sense was that progress toward civil rights was happening despite the obstacles and that with a patient and steadfast march toward the good, justice would eventually win the day.

see themselves as 'chosen' for special blessings. We have largely lost sight, however, of the cosmic religious and moral framework, including covenantal structure, which makes sense of our chosenness." Kaveny, *Prophecy without Contempt*, 231–32.

³⁴ Frank A. Thomas, *American Dream 2.0: A Christian Way out of the Great Recession* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2012), 6–7.

³⁵ Thomas, *American Dream 2.0*, 9. Much more could be said here about the theological framework and justification for this understanding of the basic goodness of the United States, but it is beyond the scope of this paper. In this section, my intention is to focus on the rhetorical implications of the American jeremiad and its formulation of exceptionalism.

³⁶ Interestingly, many (if not most) Americans who have critiqued systemic injustice *also* use the jeremiad as their framework, arguing that economic inequality or racial disparity remains "a matter of unfulfilled values and not a structural flaw in the American system." Thomas notes that African Americans used a "black jeremiad" to critique slavery and the treatment of African Americans prior to the Civil War and through Jim Crow to the present day — a jeremiad that generally affirmed the American jeremiad and used its framework to call the United States to live up to its ideals. Thomas, *American Dream 2.0*, 13.

³⁷ Thomas, *American Dream 2.0*, 52.

By 1967, King's refrain had changed. Instead of celebrating the desired but unrealized ideals of the American experiment, King names the moral culpability of the United States in the war in Vietnam. The horrors of Vietnam and the unjustified actions of the United States signal that this is no longer a matter of "unfulfilled American values, but a clear example of the fundamental defects in the American system."³⁸ Rather than affirming and anticipating justice and righteousness on the part of the United States, King critiques the basic values that underlie U.S. involvement in Vietnam. Rather than expressing confidence in American ideals, King positions himself as a global citizen and "a son of the living God"—something beyond the calling of race or nation or creed.³⁹ As he concludes this speech, his sentences begin, "If we will but make the right choice..."⁴⁰ In two years, King's rhetoric has shifted from "Not if, but when" to "Not when, but if."

Predictably, the Montgomery sermon was much more positively received than the one given at Riverside. At the risk of oversimplifying Thomas' larger argument, the Montgomery speech upheld the American jeremiad, and the Riverside speech did not. As Thomas puts it, "In that era, and today as well, the American audience had/has a difficult time with the premise that America was/is morally corrupt."⁴¹ Thomas continues,

What truly incited the critics to regard 'Beyond Vietnam' as 'ineradicably radical' was that King called on America to give up its concept of American uniqueness and exceptionalism. For King, one of the by-products of American uniqueness and exceptionalism was imperialism, an attitude that resulted in genocide, slavery, racism, and violence. 'Beyond Vietnam' was unquestionably regarded as radical because King adopted the formidable rhetorical challenge of reshaping centuries of American identity and mythology.⁴²

In 2008, sermons by the Rev. Dr. Jeremiah Wright, pastor at Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago, came under intense attack after media outlets announced that the then-presidential candidate Barack Obama attended the church. Wright's rhetorical style and content, often modeled on Old Testament prophetic proclamation, became harshly criticized as "anti-American," "radical," "alarming," "angry," and that of a "grievance-mongering preacher animated by the voracity of hate."⁴³ As with "Beyond Vietnam," Wright's sermons represented the vehement cultural rejection of speech outside the American jeremiad. "When one makes radical rhetorical moves outside of the cultural myth," Thomas writes, "then condemnation and demonization is often the response. The American jeremiad limits the political choices of the social critic and does not allow for assessments of structural flaws in America, and therefore functions as a discourse of social control."⁴⁴

Racial bias and lack of familiarity with Black pulpit traditions clearly played a role in the vilification of Wright, but here, Thomas's focus is not on the race of the speaker but on the use of the American jeremiad to limit dissent and reject that which does not reflect American

³⁸ Thomas, *American Dream 2.0*, 52.

³⁹ Thomas, *American Dream 2.0*, 53.

⁴⁰ Thomas, *American Dream 2.0*, 55. Emphasis mine.

⁴¹ Thomas, *American Dream 2.0*, 68.

⁴² Thomas, *American Dream 2.0*, 68.

⁴³ Edward S. Herman and David Peterson, "Jeremiah Wright in the Propaganda System," *Monthly Review*, September 1, 2008, <https://monthlyreview.org/2008/09/01/jeremiah-wright-in-the-propaganda-system/>.

⁴⁴ Thomas, *American Dream 2.0*, 75.

optimism. That many who have voiced dissent by contradicting the American jeremiad are people of color and other recipients of injustice and violence inflicted in the name of the United States is not incidental but intrinsic to Thomas' argument. Those who operate outside the jeremiad are often those who, because of their experiences, were never able to accept it to begin with.

Thomas then turns to Barack Obama's speech, "A More Perfect Union," offered in March 2008 in the wake of the maelstrom over Wright's sermons. By the time Obama gave the speech, the public conversation had landed squarely on the issue of race in America — namely, how critique of American greatness felt unpatriotic and demeaning to many white Americans, while unabashed patriotism and celebration of American greatness caused deep pain to African Americans who had never been fully included in American democracy.⁴⁵ Obama threads this needle by affirming the "unquestionable greatness" in the founding documents of the nation but suggesting that the idea of democracy is "unfinished," to be completed by each succeeding generation through common responsibility to form a more perfect union across all divisions (including race).⁴⁶

Obama's speech succeeded in lowering the tensions around his association with Jeremiah Wright (whose words he publicly denounced in the speech), and Obama sought to align the grievance of Black America with that of others who had felt left out of the American Dream. For Thomas, "A More Perfect Union" was an effort to persuade a composite audience of white and Black, privileged and aggrieved, immigrant or U.S.-born (Obama's parents included both), to embrace a common vision that would make progress toward a better nation for everyone.⁴⁷ The strategy worked: the speech was generally well-received, and the overarching message helped Obama win the 2008 and 2012 elections. But a simultaneous backlash against America's first Black president also grew. Donald Trump's use of white grievance, misogyny, and white Christian nationalism helped him capture the White House—defeating in 2016 the first female presidential candidate of a major party and, in 2024, the first female and person of color to be vice president of the United States. The results again revealed the ongoing and polarized battle—if not for the soul of America, then for power over who controls its trajectory. As Whitehead and Perry put it:

Throughout its history, America has experienced several transformations—cultural, political, technological, demographic, economic—many of which are interrelated. Like any society in which old orders and regimes are threatened by rapid transition, those who have historically benefited from the status quo not only marshal justifications for the old order, but rally a coordinated response among those who stand to lose the most if that old order topples.⁴⁸

The Status Quo and American Civil Religion

One of Thomas's arguments is that continual reinforcement of the American jeremiad in the public square has helped maintain the status quo and hindered the larger social transformation needed for the achievement of greater equality. Because the jeremiad sets boundaries around acceptable dissent and disallows deep critique of "American values," and

⁴⁵ Thomas, *American Dream 2.0*, 96.

⁴⁶ Thomas, *American Dream 2.0*, 96–98.

⁴⁷ Thomas, *American Dream 2.0*, 90–91.

⁴⁸ Whitehead and Perry, *Taking America Back for God*, Conclusion.

since these are also values to which the jeremiad appeals, attempts to challenge systems and structures tend to get coopted and subsumed by the status quo. For instance, the idea that the United States was established on the claim that “all men were created equal” limits the freedom to question the truthfulness of that claim; in order to demand equality, the challenger has to point to the fundamental American value that would grant it, which is itself a demonstration of the existence of the American value in the first place. Even if the argument is that the value has not been fully realized, the naming of the value lends itself to being above critique.⁴⁹

Further, the resistance to critique allows for justification of the very thing the value rejects. For example, Thomas identifies twin dynamics of the American empire: “the release of more creative energy than any other modern nation coinciding with unparalleled levels of violence, genocide, and domination of subjected people.”⁵⁰ Rather than rejecting the latter while honoring the former, the need to support “creative energy” became the justification for the “necessary” violence, genocide, and domination that makes U.S. innovation possible. At our current crossroads, white Christian nationalism claims that protection of our “freedoms” requires the expulsion of immigrants who are unworthy of America’s benefits, the firing of “DEI” hires who are unworthy of their jobs, and the disregard for those who “depend” on the government instead of being independently “successful,” as the American dream proscribes. Within this construct, preserving certain elements of American cultural identity becomes a value, even as doing so is a betrayal of that identity. According to Thomas, King experienced a similar reality after his “Beyond Vietnam” speech:

For King, at the top of his hierarchy of values was the brotherhood and sisterhood of all, and when one treated another as “enemy,” one demeaned their brotherhood and sisterhood. For the American public, at the top of their hierarchy of values was the preservation of the unique character of American freedom, democracy, and free-market economy—the preservation of American cultural identity. For the American public, an enemy was anyone who threatened these cherished values. Many Americans would be willing to kill or be killed to preserve these unique values. As a matter of fact, it is a presumption from the perspective of the majority of the American public that all rational beings make war on their enemies to sustain their way of life. This value was a presumption that was regarded as normal and taken for granted by the majority of the American people.⁵¹

Particularly challenging for U.S. Christians today is not just that white Christian nationalism has long roots in U.S. history but that the values that underlie it are not that far from general cultural and religious beliefs held by many middle-of-the-road Americans. As we saw previously, white Christian nationalism is a combination of beliefs: that the success of the United States is part of God’s plan, that the federal government should advocate Christian values and allow for prayer in schools and religious symbols in government buildings, etc.⁵² Sadly, many of these values emerged from distinctly mainstream—and, in fact, *mainline*—undertakings of the 20th century.

⁴⁹ Thomas, *American Dream 2.0*, 22–25.

⁵⁰ Thomas, *American Dream 2.0*, 131.

⁵¹ Thomas, *American Dream 2.0*, 67.

⁵² Gorski and Perry, *The Flag and the Cross*, 15–16.

In *Baptizing America: How Mainline Protestants Helped Build Christian Nationalism*, Brian Kaylor and Beau Underwood detail how mainline Protestant denominations in the United States led and participated in efforts we might now see as indistinguishable from Christian nationalism.⁵³ For example, in 1950, the inaugural meeting of the ecumenical National Council of Churches (at the time a largely white, mainline Protestant body) took as its theme “This Nation Under God,” and early NCC presidents and vice presidents spoke strongly of the mission to make the United States a truly Christian nation.⁵⁴ At a Rose Garden ceremony in 1952, representatives from the National Council of Churches presented President Harry Truman with the first copy printed of the Revised Standard Version of the Bible.⁵⁵ The phrase “under God” was added to the Pledge of Allegiance after Rev. George Docherty of New York Avenue Presbyterian Church preached a sermon advocating its inclusion, intentionally given on a February Sunday in 1954 when he knew President Eisenhower would be in attendance. Docherty argued that to omit “under God” from the pledge was to “omit the definitive character of the American way of life.”⁵⁶ On June 14—Flag Day—the same year, Eisenhower signed the change into law, as “Onward Christian Soldiers” was played on the Capitol steps.⁵⁷ U.S. Representative Charles Bennett, a member of a Disciples of Christ congregation, lobbied and won support for making “In God We Trust” the official national motto (the unofficial but traditional motto had been *E Pluribus Unum*—out of many, one), which became law in 1956.⁵⁸ Over the 230 years of chaplaincy in the U.S. House and Senate, 83 percent of all chaplains have come from just four denominational traditions: Presbyterian, Methodist, American Baptist, and Episcopal.

Important to highlight here is the dominance and influence of particular forms of white Protestant Christianity throughout U.S. history, as noted by PRRI (and Kaylor and Underwood):

Mainline Protestant denominations have played an outsized role in America’s history, given that most of the nation’s founders were members of what we now refer to as mainline Protestant churches. Until the 1960s, more than half of American adults identified with the largest seven mainline Protestant traditions.⁵⁹

This role was partly strengthened by the positive orientation most mainline Protestants held toward Enlightenment ideas, ecumenism and interfaith cooperation, and global partnership, which opened avenues for collaboration with government and other institutions. Simultaneously, however, this openness “created an environment where God and country were too easily joined

⁵³ “Mainline Protestant” refers generally to white, non-evangelical Protestants. “The common definition of mainline Protestants focuses on the historic denominations sometimes called the ‘Seven Sisters’: American Baptist Churches USA, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Episcopal Church, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Presbyterian Church (USA), United Church of Christ, and United Methodist Church.” Brian Kaylor and Beau T. Underwood, *Baptizing America: How Mainline Protestants Helped Build Christian Nationalism* (Des Peres, MO: Chalice Press, 2024), 9.

⁵⁴ Kaylor and Underwood, *Baptizing America*, 70–74.

⁵⁵ Kaylor and Underwood, *Baptizing America*, 110.

⁵⁶ Congressional Record 1954, A1795, quoted in Kaylor and Underwood, *Baptizing America*, 76–77.

⁵⁷ Kaylor and Underwood, *Baptizing America*, 78.

⁵⁸ Kaylor and Underwood, *Baptizing America*, 92–93.

⁵⁹ Public Religion Research Institute, “Clergy and Congregations in a Time of Transformation: Findings from the 2022-2023 Mainline Protestant Clergy Survey,” PRRI | *At the Intersection of Religion, Values, and Public Life*. (blog), September 13, 2023, <https://www.prri.org/research/clergy-and-congregations-in-a-time-of-transformation-findings-from-the-2022-2023-mainline-protestant-clergy-survey/>.

together. The relationship was perceived as mutually edifying—or at least innocuous—but has proven to be destructive to both.”⁶⁰

The slipperiest dynamic is perhaps the relationship between white Protestant Christianity and so-called “American civil religion.” In his seminal 1967 essay, Robert Bellah described civil religion as a “collection of beliefs, symbols, and rituals with respect to sacred things and institutionalized in a collectivity,” suggesting that civil religion was neither “religion in general,” “sectarian,” nor “in any specific sense Christian.”⁶¹ Similarly, historian John Wilsey writes “Civil religion is a set of practices, symbols and beliefs distinct from traditional religion, yet providing a universal values paradigm around which the citizenry can unite. Unity is key to understanding civil religion.”⁶² Seeking “universal” values and common identity can help form a “unified” citizenry, but it is a delicate balance, says Wilsey. Relying too strongly on theological or religious foundations can be a pitfall for civil religion. However, when civil religion is confined to cultural and/or political values, “It can serve to unify the nation around those values transcending time and circumstance: the rights to life, liberty and property, religious freedom, equality, rule of law, individual dignity and justice.”⁶³

Wilsey not only claims these values as uniquely and exceptionally American, he suggests that they are and always have been *universal*.⁶⁴ But Wilsey distinguishes the deification of values (or the religion behind them) from the potential of shared values to unify a diverse nation around goals to pursue and values to emulate. Wilsey vehemently advocates for the latter and rejects any overt connections between American Christianity and these universal values. His intention is to distinguish between two American “exceptionalisms”: “closed,” which sits firmly in the realm of idolatry and is rooted in (false) Christian beliefs of American superiority and mission, and “open,” which promotes the nation as a beacon of freedom to the world’s oppressed based on “universal,” nonsectarian values.

The issue, of course, is that these exceptionalisms cannot truly be disentangled from each other. Throughout U.S. history, civil religion has relied on Christian images and symbols, like the use of biblical archetypes (the Exodus and a Promised Land, a Chosen People, a new Israel and/or new Jerusalem, etc.).⁶⁵ American civil religion has long affirmed the idea that the collective and the individual are obligated to carry out God’s will on earth, which served as the “motivating spirit” behind the nation’s founding and has been carried forward by every subsequent generation.⁶⁶ The importance of democracy and its perpetuation were juxtaposed against “godless communism” during the Cold War, further enmeshing monotheism—if not Christianity—with “universal” values like freedom. Bellah also names the centrality of “God” in civil religion, suggesting presciently that this could pose a challenge if the populace no longer adhered to a common belief in God’s existence:

⁶⁰ Kaylor and Underwood, *Baptizing America*, 11. In their book, Kaylor and Underwood expand on the idea of how Protestant influence in the government has been detrimental to the church; unfortunately, that discussion is largely beyond what can be covered in this paper.

⁶¹ Robert N. Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” *Daedalus* 96, no. 1 (1967): 15–16.

⁶² Wilsey, *American Exceptionalism and Civil Religion*, 20.

⁶³ Wilsey, *American Exceptionalism and Civil Religion*, 26.

⁶⁴ Of course, as Thomas points out, “The ritual and benefit of freedom of America as *always* been restricted to a few certain privileged groups within American culture.” Thomas, *How to Preach a Dangerous Sermon*, xxxiv.

⁶⁵ Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” 18.

⁶⁶ Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” 5.

If the whole God symbolism requires reformulation, there will be obvious consequences for the civil religion, consequences perhaps of liberal alienation and of fundamentalist ossification that have not so far been prominent in this realm. The civil religion has been a point of articulation between the profoundest commitments of the Western religious and philosophical tradition and the common beliefs of ordinary Americans. It is not too soon to consider how the deepening theological crisis may affect the future of this articulation.⁶⁷

Regardless of any universal claims American civil religion hoped to represent, Bellah clearly saw Christianity as its basic foundation. Thus, the decline in U.S. Christianity beginning in the 1960s was a potential disruption to that civil unity. More importantly, Bellah also suggests that without shared *religious* conviction, the nonsectarian values undergirding civil religion could shift or falter. Kaylor and Underwood take that concern a step further, arguing that in the midst of increased religious (and non-religious) diversity, the Christian-ish language used by civil religion has already lost influence and definition in the national mindset. As a result, a civil religion so deeply enmeshed with the language and symbols of Western Christianity will continue to be associated with those most loudly claiming the title of “Christian”—which means American civil religion “might not function much differently in practicality from Christian Nationalism.”⁶⁸ While civil religion has often been seen as harmless (or even unifying), it has predominantly reflected white mainline Protestants who believed their enlightened perspectives could speak for everyone else. At the same time, to be “universal,” civil religion watered down Christian theology into vague expressions of “freedom,” “service,” and “sacrifice,” devoid of deeper understanding and easily coopted by those seeking to maintain the “status quo” when their grip on power and influence was threatened.⁶⁹

In truth, civil religion was only ever “universal” in as much as it encompassed diverse viewpoints, and like the American jeremiad, it continued to hold to American exceptionalism, often at the expense of important self-reflection. While the separation of church and state might have been novel when the United States began, the Western/Christian religious formulas that undergirded both the founding documents and the development of civil religion have come full circle to lend support to white Christian nationalism and idolatry of the state—so much so that white Christian nationalists now occupy the highest positions of leadership in the government, and are demonstrating daily that their loyalties were never to democracy or the rule of law, despite their invocation of the trappings of American civil religion.

A Time to Throw Away

The question of whether the United States has perpetually waged a battle over the “soul of the nation”—a push and pull between an authoritarian form of governance and an inclusive, multiracial democracy—is probably best left to historians and social scientists. What is clear, however, is that the voices of those who cling to the American jeremiad tend to get a public hearing. Those who reiterate the belief that the United States is an experiment rooted in unassailable foundational ideals receive the applause. Those who modulate their critiques with

⁶⁷ Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” 15–16. In 1967, 92 percent of Americans identified as Christian. By 2022, that number was 68 percent, and as indicated previously, that marker may not indicate actual Christian belief or practice. See Kaylor and Underwood, *Baptizing America*, 42.

⁶⁸ Kaylor and Underwood, *Baptizing America*, 42.

⁶⁹ Kaylor and Underwood, *Baptizing America*, 45–48.

appeals to the universal values of American civil religion win elections. Thomas points out the dilemma Obama faced when he gave the “A More Perfect Union” speech: Obama was attempting to express social critique in a way that could be persuasive to a composite, multiracial audience *and* deliver social change.⁷⁰ The question Thomas raises is whether or not change is truly possible when bounded by the limits of the American jeremiad.

Writing in 2012 in the wake of the Great Recession and during Obama’s first term, Thomas concedes that “the current reality of the Great Recession in America demands a critique outside the American jeremiad and at the level of the structural values of America.”⁷¹ At that time, Thomas’ purpose was to incite an uprising of pastors, congregations, and people of goodwill to reclaim the American Dream in ways that were non-exploitative of others and moved from exclusively economic and consumeristic understandings to a vision akin to King’s “Beloved Community.”⁷² In 2018, in the wake of Donald Trump’s first successful run for the U.S. presidency, Thomas pushed further:

What is it going to take to overcome America’s original sin of racism? . . . While I am not a prophet of doom, my belief is that it is going to take a great deal of common death to break past the radical divisions in our culture to allow a window for genuine empathy . . . What kind of death will provide the window that we need to bridge the racial divide, economic inequality, and all the terrible divisions that we saw front and center in the [2016] presidential election, and looks like will continue into the foreseeable future? We are the most diverse nation on earth and that makes the American experiment unusually beautiful and extraordinarily tense. What will it take to overcome division?⁷³

I suggest one of the “deaths” Americans need to consider is that of the American jeremiad. It seems clear we will not get to “a more perfect union” until we are willing to throw out our aversion to foundational and existential critiques of the nation. No more can the United States fool itself into believing that some fundamental goodness in our ideals is enough to absolve our national sins. No longer can we hide behind the arrogant conviction that we are “exceptional” and that our exceptionalism is sufficient to justify injustice or give license to our oppressive and imperialistic fantasies of righteousness. As I write in April 2025, the façade of American exceptionalism seems to be crumbling for many who had long believed it could withstand any challenge. As government officials dismantle critical infrastructure, abandon the rule of law, reject free speech and due process, and side with dictators while threatening long-time allies, the narrative of the superiority of “American values” rings particularly hollow. Unfortunately, this is not the first time we have made collective choices to compromise our public values while maintaining the assumption of our own exceptionalism.

The call to Christian leaders in this moment—and especially to preachers—is to attend to the fact that voices from within our fold have frequently been the ones championing American exceptionalism, supremacy, and foundational inerrancy.⁷⁴ Theologically, we know these beliefs to be contrary to Christian teachings that all people are created in the image of God and that no

⁷⁰ Thomas, *American Dream 2.0*, 90–92.

⁷¹ Thomas, *American Dream 2.0*, 21.

⁷² Thomas, *American Dream 2.0*, 149.

⁷³ Thomas, *How to Preach a Dangerous Sermon*, 21.

⁷⁴ Discerning readers will also recognize that American exceptionalism has been infused with triumphalist Christian exceptionalism. For more on this alignment, see Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne*.

one is intrinsically more important or worthy. But we who live in the United States are constantly bombarded with the message that this is the most powerful nation on earth—and that makes us the best. Our international dominance is continually equated with our superiority, and “superiority” indicates our *worthiness*. Thus, if we are not the best, we are not anything. This is the heart of the American jeremiad: we cannot critique our foundations because if they are *not* faultless and exemplary, then they have no value at all. While we may instinctively reject the ugly rhetoric of white Christian nationalism, many of us have quietly come to associate the ultimate power of the United States with “what God wants” for the world.

The complexities of American civil religion, public religious rhetoric and the American jeremiad, and limited religious and biblical literacy in the U.S. populace, make our responses to white Christian nationalism exceptionally challenging. In the face of increasing threats to free speech and a crackdown by the government against those who critique or oppose its goals, those who hope to respond faithfully and bravely as Christ’s disciples may have a tough road ahead. Two temptations seem probable for the U.S. church: first, an avoidance of the political and a retreat into the “spiritual” as a means to sidestep controversy and keep people “safe”; and second, equating the preservation of multiracial democracy with the *missio Dei*—the “perfection of the Union” as a fulfillment of Christian discipleship (which would be, ironically, a kind of nationalism). In an era when white Christian nationalism has usurped the tropes of civil religion and American Christianity, and because mainline Protestants played a significant role in shaping and supporting American civil religion, U.S. Christians who want to resist white Christian nationalism need to be especially conscientious about who we are, what we stand for, and how we talk about it. This is not merely a question of semantics and rhetoric but of *identity*.

A primary task for preachers and other Christian leaders will be to help congregations and communities let go of long-held and problematic self-understandings. White mainline Protestants who have enjoyed political and social power have begun to recognize (though perhaps not truly accept) their waning influence and dwindling numbers. An additional and crucial move for U.S. Christians of all stripes will be to release our beliefs in American exceptionalism. This is not to say that we must reject values we believe in, but it is time to finally and completely throw out false notions that so-called American values are intrinsically superior to all others. It is possible to be proud of something and to value it without having to believe it is better than everything else or that it must be imposed everywhere else. We can reject the premise that good ideas must compete with one another, with only one possible winner.

Similarly, it is time to abandon the American jeremiad that claims the United States was foundationally ideal and without fault and that any problems were just bumps in the otherwise providential road. The colonialism, imperialism, genocide, and violence of our national story are not side hustles alongside the real work of exemplary (if messy) democracy. Over and over, the “success” of the United States has been built on choices to abandon the very values the jeremiad trumpets: equality, freedom, and justice. We will not be able to combat authoritarianism and white Christian nationalism through the tired and false narrative that “this is not what America stands for.” This has *always been* a path at the crossroads, one which the nation often has chosen.

Throwing away these aspects of American/Christian identity may be unsettling and scary for many among us, especially if our personal and communal beliefs are deeply rooted in these identities. Like the comprehensive work necessary to address racism, this change in identity will require confession and repentance, as well as reparation and restitution. Fortunately, Christian theology offers tried and true means to engage such practices. Similarly, this work will require

lament and grief for all that we have discovered we are not and all that we had hoped we were. A time to throw away is necessarily a time to grieve what has been lost.

Letting go of these American/Christian identity markers may also lead to another fear: that without these beliefs, we do not know who we are. Those of us who have grown up in a dominant culture in the world's "most powerful nation" that sees itself as a beacon to the world have a great deal of un/learning to do about what it means to be a "good" America without having to be *the great* America. We must un/learn how to affirm the political and social values we hold *as a result* of our faith without having to make them *exclusive* to our faith; to stop using righteousness to excuse our violence, domination, and consumption; to be humble and honest, as well as noble, without having to be specially "chosen."

Finally, we need to throw away the idea of a battle for America's soul that offers only two paths forward, both of which emerge from our exceptionalism. Perhaps it is time for a different metaphor: a *metanoia* or U-turn of the American soul, a reimagination of the American soul, a reconstitution or rehabilitation of the American soul, a rebirth for the American soul. A time to throw away may mean the chance to find ourselves newly unburdened and unhindered by the need to reiterate untruths or prop up false narratives. Instead, we may suddenly be able to envision possibilities we could not have conceived before.

A preacher who wants to address questions of identity and its loss—especially in relationship to white supremacy and racism—might consider Frank Thomas' *dangerous sermon* approach focused on cultivating moral imagination. Through "moral imagination," the preacher is able to "grasp and share God's abiding wisdom and ethical truth in order to benefit the individual and common humanity," in order to truly envision freedom for ourselves *and others*.⁷⁵ In preaching, the moral imagination a.) embodies equality in the sermon and in physical presence(s); b.) uses empathy from the present moment as a bridge toward future decisions for peace and justice; c.) seeks wisdom and truth in ancient texts; and d.) elevates through poetry and art to inspire wonder, hope, and mystery.⁷⁶ This moral imagination approach could help a congregation use empathy toward themselves and others to release previously held identities and embrace a new, inspiring vision for the future.

Similarly, in *Ethical Approaches to Preaching*, John McClure suggests that a *liberative ethical approach* is useful for sermons aimed at "unmasking, critique, and change of current social systems (economic, political, religious, educational, health care, etc.)."⁷⁷ Through sermons aimed at raising awareness and offering critical education, liberation ethic preachers provide ways for the congregation (and themselves) to come to new self-understandings about the hegemonies—subconscious oppressions—in which we all operate, with the goal of resisting and dismantling them. This kind of preaching is often infused with non-dominant voices and/or those most affected by the hegemony being exposed. Framing American exceptionalism as a kind of subconscious oppression that prevents true reflection and honesty could be a way to begin to examine its power in U.S. society and the church.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Thomas, *How to Preach a Dangerous Sermon*, xxiii–xxiv, xxvi.

⁷⁶ Thomas, *How to Preach a Dangerous Sermon*, 45.

⁷⁷ John S. McClure, *Ethical Approaches to Preaching: Choosing the Best Way to Preach about Difficult Issues* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2021), 61.

⁷⁸ In his 2024 Lyman Beecher Lectures at Yale Divinity School, McClure played with ideas about how preaching might respond to white Christian nationalism, especially in the third lecture in the series, "The Critical Homiletics of Genre: Case Studies for Reflection," presented October 9, 2024 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DgTVhHqIboc&list=PLbQINmUy3n7Yzm9pO4gO1BnZFAr14j5Ng&index=3>).

Worship services might also engage liturgical practices to help congregations let go of problematic ideas and claims about American exceptionalism. Confession and repentance, alongside reiteration of shared beliefs (e.g., ecumenical or international confessions of faith), could be partnered with sermons that express the need for *metanoia* or turning in new directions in relationship to our identity as American Christians. Prayer practices focused on grief and lament about the loss of what we hoped for our nation (or what we believed about it) might be integrated into existing programs of care for our communities.

Two additional homiletic approaches are worth mentioning here. Leah Schade's *Preaching in the Purple Zone* offers a sermon–dialogue–sermon method that would lend itself well to discussions about white Christian nationalism and its implications. This method would allow the preacher to offer an initial overview of the concepts, perhaps from a theological perspective, followed by a more in-depth conversation about what is at stake for congregation members, and then a second sermon shaped by the dialogue.⁷⁹ In *Preaching to Teach*, Rich Voelz suggests a “teaching” model of preaching that resists the typical pedagogical orientation of “information transmission,” instead using critical pedagogy as a model and cultivating an attentive critique of the status quo, future possibilities and hopes, and a “radical imagination” about what could be.⁸⁰

A Time to Keep

The Beloved Community preached by King required a “revolution of values” rooted in a new communal identity for the United States.⁸¹ Thomas articulates a similar reign of God:

The reign of God is not simply over a country or a group of people, but over the whole of human history. The reign of God is not about a geographical country or a particular race or ethnicity. It does not settle on boundaries and divisions that human beings make. The reign of God is not about a sentimental vagueness that does not require anything of us except that we try to be ‘nice.’ The reign of God is not a national or a political kingdom, but a community in God’s care that lives in love, joy, peace, and righteousness.⁸²

In this time of “keeping,” the first thing we hold on to is the grounded truth of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. We remember and remind each other that even as our identity as American Christians might be shifting, breaking, or taken from us, our identity as followers of Christ—the healer, the giver, the preacher, the calmer, the prophet, the crucified and resurrected one—transcends this moment and this place. Once, many years ago, I visited the Presbyterian Church in Cuba, and a pastor there said she is often asked by Americans how she lives her Christian faith in a communist country. She responds by asking if the questioner would like the polite answer or the honest answer. Then she gives the honest answer: “How can you live out your faith in a capitalist country? In Cuba, we have to trust God. We live by faith.”

The future of the United States is unknown, though the last few months indicate that we are likely in a profound existential crisis not seen since the Civil War. For the time being, the trajectory is not yet fully determined or irreversible. This is all the more reason to hold tight to

⁷⁹ Leah D. Schade, *Preaching in the Purple Zone: Ministry in the Red-Blue Divide* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2018).

⁸⁰ Richard William Voelz, *Preaching to Teach: Inspire People to Think and Act*, Artistry of Preaching (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2019).

⁸¹ Thomas, *American Dream 2.0*, 120.

⁸² Thomas, *American Dream 2.0*, 139.

and reassert what it means to be a Christian over against the false teachings of white Christian nationalism and also against a civil religion that would blow past the severity of the situation with prideful assertions of our idealized virtues. We have a wealth of deep theological resources available to help us plainly express our Christian faith and how our Christian faith calls us to demand truth, integrity, and justice from our local and national governance. This is a moment for preachers and other church leaders to keep speaking clearly and forthrightly, not only about Christian faith but about its implications for our life together.⁸³

Currently, we remain free to assert our religious beliefs even if they contradict federal leaders. However, the virulent response from the Trump administration and conservative leaders after Bishop Marian Budde's sermon at an inaugural prayer service in January could indicate that those willing to challenge political officials publicly will not experience for much longer the freedoms we once did.⁸⁴ Accordingly, Christian leaders—especially those in positions of most privilege—must remain vigilant over the freedom of all to speak and exercise their religious beliefs. Curtailing press freedom and access is not separate from the freedom of religious expression or speech; as much as any one of these rights is under attack, all may be subverted or eliminated. Meanwhile, as we keep watch, we keep nourishing our capacity for courage and resilience. Those of us used to being dominant, powerful, and influential will need to cultivate a different kind of strength to be a different kind of Christian in a different kind of nation. We do not know what is coming, but even in a best-case scenario, we will need to draw on resources and fortitude we may not have had to use before.

Finally, this is a time to keep in touch. As trust in American institutions crumbles, along with the institutions themselves (which appears to be the intent of many in the federal government), we will need more than ever communities of connection where trust can be built and sustained. Interracial, intercultural, interreligious, and international networks will be key to keeping Christian communities from isolating into self-protecting enclaves awaiting a return to the status quo. Academic guilds that intersect with religious institutions can be sources of interdisciplinary awareness and solidarity as information gets repressed or proves untrustworthy. Local organizations, non-profits, educational systems, medical facilities, libraries, art centers, and councils—all these places where trust in the community is necessary can be places of sustenance or apathy and deterioration. Now is the time to strengthen connections, before resources are scarce and fear is overwhelming. Now is the time to reach for each other and reaffirm commitments to one another.

When I first began work on this paper, I believed my task to address white Christian nationalism would be akin to previous efforts to assess preaching in relationship to racism or trauma. While there is some overlap between those important arenas and this one, white Christian nationalism in 2025 cannot be divorced from the slide of democracy toward authoritarian rule in the United States. Preachers who want to attend to the heresy of white Christian nationalism are unlikely to be able to do so without engaging the larger political realities in which this movement now flourishes—even as we must continue to differentiate our

⁸³ Amanda Tyler's 2024 book, *How to End Christian Nationalism* (Minneapolis: Broadleaf Books 2024), is helpful in this regard, especially the second chapter, "Ground Yourself in God's Love," in which she encourages readers to dig deeply into their own traditions to remember the roots of their faith and to resist the exploitation of Christianity for racist and nationalist purposes.

⁸⁴ Additionally, as academic institutions are already becoming targets of the administration, our relative safety may change for any of us at any time.

civic and Christian callings. I hope the U.S. church will answer faithfully the wider call. There is no time to lose.

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