

# **American Idolatry: How Christian Nationalism Betrays the Gospel and Threatens the Church: A conversation with Andrew L. Whitehead**

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## **TRANSCRIPT**



**NOTE: This transcript was AI-generated and has not been fully edited.**

[00:00:00] **Mark Turman:** Thank you for joining us for this episode of the Denison Forum Podcast. At the Denison Forum, we want to create digital resources that are Christ-centered, that help to equip, inspire, and mobilize believers like you to make a difference in the world, to be a culture-changing, salt-and-light Christian in every environment of influence that God gives you. We want to see that happen across the broad scope of our culture so that biblical, flourishing righteousness will spread in every corner of our environment.

Today we're talking about a very important and hot topic in the culture called Christian nationalism. And today we're talking with Dr. Andrew Whitehead and his recent book, [\*American Idolatry: How Christian Nationalism Betrays the Gospel and Threatens the Church\*](#).

Dr. Whitehead holds a PhD from Baylor University and is today the associate professor of sociology at Indiana University, Purdue University in Indianapolis. He is also the co-director of the Association of Religion Data Archives in the Center for the Study of Religion and American Culture. He is the co-author of [\*Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States\*](#), which won the 2021 Distinguished Book Award from the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion.

Whitehead has also written for the Washington Post, NBC News, Time, Religion News Service, and often speaks around the country on the topic of Christian nationalism. I think you'll find this an insightful and informative conversation, one important for today's world. Thank you for joining us.

Dr. Andrew Whitehead, welcome to the Denison Forum Podcast. We're glad to have you with us today.

[00:01:56] **Andrew Whitehead:** Yeah, thank you. I'm excited to be here with you.

[00:01:59] **Mark Turman:** It's exciting to get to jump into this topic. I'm going to be honest right at the beginning and let you know that when we get to your book in a moment. It was hard for me to read and some in some ways, and I'm sitting here going, okay here we are again two white guys talking about about some of the challenges of being white Christians in a modern American culture.

So I'm just going to give everybody a heads-up. Right here at the beginning, but we're going to talk a lot about Christian nationalism, which is a topic you're very passionate about have now written two full books about as well as a number of articles.

**But tell us the back story of Dr. Andrew Whitehead. What's a little bit of your personal story faith journey and how did this become a passionate topic for you?**

[00:02:48] **Andrew Whitehead:** Yeah. No, I appreciate that. Yeah, cause with this book, a part of it is highlighting that personal journey and how it overlapped with my professional journey. So I grew up in Northern Indiana, a small rural town. And everyone that lived in that town, we were all very similar kind of everybody went to church and, the idea of what it meant to be a good citizen, a good American was you were Christian and you were,

[00:03:13] **Mark Turman:** you described in your book right there. This is like a one stop light town.

[00:03:17] **Andrew Whitehead:** Yeah, yeah. Like my backyard was a cornfield and there's 1500 people small rural manufacturing farming community. And so this idea of what it means to And Christian is your American and if you're a good American, then you're Christian. And there was really no daylight in between those.

They were one and the same really. But then as I started growing up and I was, in church, Wednesday night, Sunday morning, Sunday night And really taught, the Christian faith to love Jesus, love the Bible, love your neighbor, all of these things. And then as I grew older and went to college and started reading more broadly, I started to see, some cracks and inconsistencies there where if the U.S. was a Christian nation, how do we think through some of the horrific aspects of that history, right? And how indigenous people were treated or how black people were enslaved. How do we put these things together?

And while, those things weren't necessarily happening right now how do they influence where we are right now? And so just wrestling with some of those questions and my Christian faith led me to a number of different books and resources where I started to really explore what it means to be Christian. And American and how those maybe can't easily overlap sometimes where to follow Jesus means that there may be times where we have to stand apart from maybe where our nation is taking us or what our nation is calling us to do and really wrestling with that.

And at the same time of that personal journey. I was also, going to grad school and learning sociology and starting to see and realize how powerful our context is for our faith. And how, when and where we're born really shapes what we think Christianity is and what it's like and the groups we're a part of. And in that sense, as a sociologist starting to explore why Americans do what they do, believe what they believe.

And what I found in working with some other colleagues over and over is that the degree to which Americans believe that the U. S. is and should be a Christian nation really told us a lot about how they would vote how they, see different social issues. And so that was where my professional journey and my personal journey overlapped where I was trying to think of how, to be faithfully Christian in modern America. And loving my neighbor, even when sometimes it seemed like many white Christians were trying to, protect themselves more than sacrifice for those around them.

And what I found was, this, I, this cultural framework of Christian nationalism really was powerful. And so that's where I started to explore it. And so in our first book, really laying out what Christian nationalism is and what it's associated with. And then in this book bringing in a bit more of the personal journey and making a claim to Christians that if we want to follow Jesus faithfully, I think we have to wrestle with this desire to see America as a Christian nation because I think in some ways that leads us astray from the gospel in that we're supposed to be aliens in

this world. And that means too, not that we can't be patriotic and love our country, but that we have to recognize where our Christian faith might lead us in a different direction compared to maybe what our country wants us to do or political party were part of whether it is the right or the left.

And so that's part of this journey as well.

[00:06:52] **Mark Turman:** That's a great setup to where I wanted to go as well, which is coming off of the previous book, give us kind of the elevator concise definition that you work with in terms of what is Christian nationalism. There's there's a number of. People talking about this topic, writing on this topic our friends at the Colson Center are hosting a meeting about this in a few days.

And so there's a lot of conversation going into this next presidential election cycle. And a lot has been written by you and others and a lot, this conversation is heating up. But I think we're using this term and one of the things we hope to do by our podcast is just give clarity about what are these things and definitions.

So give us the elevator definition. Christian nationalism is . . . And how do we identify it in our own lives, in our churches, in our communities?

[00:07:48] **Andrew Whitehead:** Yeah. Yeah. So Christian nationalism I define as a cultural framework and cultural frameworks are, could be any, there are a number of them, right? That, that people have and accept.

But they're narratives about who we are and where we come from they contain symbols, they contain value systems, all these things together create cultural frameworks. And so Christian nationalism is a particular cultural framework that desires for a very particular expression of Christianity to be privileged in the public sphere in the United States.

And it desires to see this particular expression of Christianity basically provide the overarching framework for how the United States operates, what it means to be an American citizen. And it wants to see the government defend, again, the centrality of that particular expression. And this definition is built off of a number of empirical studies that, that I've been a part of.

And the reason why it's important to say a particular expression of Christianity is that, as we know in the US, there are many different expressions, and not all of them embrace Christian nationalism. Some do. But what we really want to point out is that it's more than just saying

Christianity and saying, this is you know, the Nicene Creed or some of our, Orthodox Christian beliefs.

But the Christianity of Christian nationalism brings with it a lot of different other cultural beliefs and values as a part of that cultural framework. And it's that additional baggage, I think, That's what makes it problematic and can lead Americans away from living out a gospel that Jesus came and inaugurated and called us to.

And so that is really the point. So when we're talking about Christian nationalism, it's wanting to see, again, this very particular expression of Christianity privileged in the public sphere and to see the government defend and preserve that cultural framework as central.

[00:09:46] **Mark Turman:** So help us. By way of contrast, how is Christian nationalism different from what many of us grew up just understanding some basic tenets of what we would call patriotism.

What is it? We we talk about this and we have talked about this a number of times in various contexts at Christian or Denison forum and. In some ways to say that to call out that Christian nationalism is really the warped or the perverted expression of what is what should be healthy patriotism.

So as a contrast, tell us **what's the difference between nationalism and patriotism.**

[00:10:23] **Andrew Whitehead:** Yeah, that's a great question. And I think you make a really good point where Christian nationalism, I think not only perverts the Christian gospel and I think makes us, it hinders us from fully living out the gospel truth, but it also perverts being an American citizen in some ways, right?

And being a healthy patriot. So it really destroys both. And so when we're talking about patriotism, we can understand that, and a lot of researchers and writers understand that, as a love for our fellow countrymen and women. It's it's a healthy love of who we are and, by historical accident being born here.

But having an appreciation and a love for those around us and wanting to see those people around us flourish. And so when I think of patriotism, one thing that, that often comes to mind is when we're, watching the Olympics. I may not know that person that's competing in some sport, and I've just now heard about them, but the fact that they're wearing, the red, white and blue and representing my country, all of a sudden I am cheering for them. I have an affinity for them and it's wanting to see them succeed and do well.

But nationalism is this desire to see the United States elevated above any other country or people to the detriment of those others. And so it's less like a patriotism of cheering for your fellow countrymen or women. And wanting now to actually to see the U. S. dominate. And be the only people that can compete, right? And so it isn't just, cheering them on and then, cheering on other folks from other countries, or at least, representing them well. But now it should be just us on the stage. It should be only us to have an access to winning a medal or whatever else.

And this idea of nationalism is wanting to see the U. S. elevated over and above everyone else, whereas patriotism is wanting to see people around us flourish as a part of a healthy community. And so when we're talking about Christian nationalism, again, seeing this particular expression of Christianity elevated over and above any other type of Christian over and above any other type of religious other, religious minorities or people who are not religious, wanting to see only the quote unquote us the in group benefit from American society. And so I think that's where it leads us away from the gospel. And it also leads us away from a healthy patriotism of wanting to see America do well and do better. And to see those around us do well and do better. And yeah, that's how we can distinguish between patriotism and nationalism.

[00:12:54] **Mark Turman:** So if I'm following with you, it Just pick up on your metaphor about the Olympics that the idea there might be that a patriot would be excited to see one of the athletes from their country do well, disappointed if they didn't, but a nationalist would be angry if Americans didn't win every contest and crush all opposition even to the point of really being angry about it and that kind of thing.

And I, one of the things I picked up early on in your work, great book is that you see this from a sociological standpoint and like I said, by doing empirical studies. That this idea of Christian nationalism is very pervasive in our culture. And it's something that may have actually infiltrated many of us without even our awareness. And and as I said at the beginning of our podcast, your book is jolting at least. To me as having grown up in this country in a small town, like you as a white Christian and trying to be learning to be very patriotic, but let's talk a little bit about how pervasive it is and where the average listener to this podcast might've bumped into it.

And I'll offer this as an example. So I pastored churches for 35 years. I live in a Dallas suburb. And one morning my neighbor walks across the street and says, Hey, I know you're a pastor. Can we have a conversation? I was like, yeah, absolutely. He said my pastor made a decision to remove the American flag that has been in our sanctuary for most all Sundays. And it's just been a part of the furniture. Yeah. And he decided that he wanted to move it out of the sanctuary and into into the lobby area. Yeah. And some of us are having a real problem with that. Yeah. That and that might be a very small example of where somebody might be bumping into some of the realities of the intersection and conflict between patriotism and nationalism, right?

[00:15:08] **Andrew Whitehead:** Yeah, no, I think that's a wonderful example. And that's one of the examples to in the book that I used to talk about this, where I think it really highlights what we're talking about and how it can be taken for granted and hidden from us.

So with that same example, if somebody or the pastor, whoever takes the flag out of the sanctuary, I've had one pastor remark that if you ever wanted to anger half the congregation, move the flag. And I'm sure your neighbor was echoing that reality. But I think what that does is it points out a deeper truth to us of why is there anger? What did that flag represent in the sanctuary that once it's moved then generates this feeling and response from us?

And that I think kind of highlights where we might be idolizing this too easy of an overlap between being an American and being a Christian because a flag in the sanctuary, what does that represent for our brothers and sisters who are Christians who come from other countries and they come to our sanctuary and they see the United States flag in that sanctuary?

Does that make them feel? In some ways less than in that context or on the outside because they would never pledge allegiance to the U. S. because they aren't citizens of it, but we're supposed to be citizens of the kingdom of God and the body of Christ. And when we're thinking of what it means to be a Christian and that our higher allegiance is to something different why is that flag needed in the sanctuary?

And when we move it out, what does that show us? And so I think that's a really good example. And that's one, I think, there are other aspects of being a patriot where when we talk about the history of the United States and we wrestle with some of the darker moments you'll have Christians and Americans who can be upset by that, who don't want to do that.

And so what I think too, this is another way that we can highlight our higher allegiances to Christ and the kingdom of God, rather than to America, is that if you love your country, or let's say this, if you love somebody close to you, one way to love them is if they do something wrong I have kids, I don't know if you have kids, if they do something wrong, pointing that out to them, helping them see that, hopefully helping them move in a better direction going forward.

If we love them, we don't shy away from difficult conversations. It's a part of showing we're committed to them. In the same way with our country, we shouldn't shy away from difficult moments, difficult histories, difficult conversations. If we truly love it, we're committed to seeing it do better. Just like our loved ones around us.

And so I think, the flag in the sanctuary or even wrestling with some of our darker histories or inequality that we see around us right now as Christians devoted to the truth, we should be ready to listen to learn to wrestle with some of those issues because ultimately we should be committed

to doing good to and with those around us. And so I think those are two examples of the ways that Christian nationalism kind of covers over that. It wants to ignore darker aspects. It wants to maintain the status quo. It doesn't want to see any sort of change. It wouldn't want to see, other nations or people groups elevated.

It wants to see again this particular expression of Christianity elevated. And so as Christians, we should be skeptical of that, I think, and wrestle with that. And again, that's something that I try to do myself in the book. Instead of pointing fingers at others, try to point it at myself as I wrestle with these things, as I'm on this journey, I'm still learning, still growing, still trying to do better. And I think hopefully that's a part of what we're trying to do as we think about what it means to be American and Christian in this particular context.

[00:19:03] **Mark Turman:** And one of the real strong positive points I've picked up from your work is that the just. The distinguishing factor in many ways is the is that the, that a Christian should have a deep passion that every person would flourish to the fullest extent possible.

Even those that don't share our faith in Christ, we would still want to see the highest degree of flourishing possible for them and and not exclude anyone. Whereas nationalism says, it's just about it's really, as you point out in the book. Perspective of abundance versus a perspective of scarcity.

The nationalist says it's an issue of scarcity. There's almost, there's only so much to go around and we have to get all we can and protect what we get. Yeah. And in this in your discussion, you basically point out three primary tools and really call this out as an idolatry, as a very subtle, a very pervasive form of idolatry to to move away from biblical Christianity into this idea of Christian nationalism, where this particular version of Christian understanding gets exalted in a civic sense.

Talk about these three tools that the idol engages around nationalism of power of fear and of violence you really call these out very clearly as operating tools where nationalism it's really where the rubber meets the road is in these three areas.

[00:20:32] **Andrew Whitehead:** Yeah, I do. And as we're talking about in our Christian faith, historic Christian faith, but also too, as it extends past that with how God has interacted with humanity, right?

And the Christian scriptures, go back even further than, the dawn of Christianity. But as we look at that, idols have been a central part of that story. And so idols are anything that we look to for protection and provision other than God. But idols demand allegiance and it costs us something.



And yeah, in the book, I highlight the three idols of Christian nationalism, power, fear, and violence.

And so power is this again, I think it's the central idol of Christian nationalism. It's a self interested power. It's wanting to have privileged access to power, which again is The ability to do what you want despite others opposition, but it's doing that in only to benefit the quote unquote us, the in group who we are.

And so it isn't trying to leverage power in order that all can flourish, but it's you know, trying to maintain privilege access so that we can ensure we get what we think we deserve to the detriment of others. And so there's a whole history here, but I think, again, that really draws us away from the example that Jesus gave, that he lived out, that he called us to, where he was, in Philippians we read about that, where Jesus was with God had equal, power, but he set that aside in order to go to reach us, to allow us to flourish, to meet us where we were at.

And so as Christians, it isn't as though we just ab, abdicate any power at all, but what we do is we really try to maintain a distance from this self interested power only used to benefit us. What we want to do is use power, political power, be involved in the political process, but ensure that involvement is focused on ensuring that again, we broaden access to the benefits of being an American citizen, of which there are many, right?

There are so many things that I'm thankful for living here. And as a Christian, I'm convinced that we should take part in civil society in power, when we use power, but have that focus not just to benefit me or my small group, my in group, but to benefit everyone to open up access. So we have power and self interested power.

And then we have the idol of fear. And so whenever we have privileged access to power, we're afraid that the quote unquote, they are going to come and take it away. And so fear and sense of threat is a really powerful idol to draw the lines, the boundary lines around who we are and who they are, right?

And it creates these walls, dividing walls of hostility is the way that I describe it. And so we're always, a sense of fear and threat that they're going to come and take it away from us. And when that happens, when we are, aiming at trying to maintain privileged access to power.

We're afraid of that being taken away. We tend to do anything to protect it and to protect ourselves because again, we feel like it's being stolen from us. And that's where violence is a natural result because violence will be used and the threat of violence too will be used to defend those boundaries to fight against whoever we think is going to come and take away our self interested power.

And so those three idols are really intertwined within Christian nationalism. And over throughout our history, we see that, groups that want to see this nation be a quote unquote, Christian nation, really means they want to see a nation that benefits a particular subset of the Christian population, which has usually been white, natural born citizens, to the detriment of other groups.

And that, I think, is what draws us away from the gospel. What Jesus came and commanded us to do and what he wanted to do. And so those idols are a central part of us wrestling with Christian nationalism in the American context.

[00:24:32] **Mark Turman:** Yeah, it really frames this up for me in a way of trying to help us understand that God didn't give us the Bible and Christianity as an as a nation building tool right now nations groups communities will be blessed to in very significant ways as they Obviously embrace the truths of Scripture and follow that but that was not the primary purpose of God bringing Salvation to us in Christ and God bringing us the truth of the Bible.

It wasn't intended to simply be a nation building manual. It's something much bigger than that. Something deeper than that. I want to go back and unpack these a little bit, particularly starting with power. We've talked a lot about that at Denison forum. I think it was Nietzsche and other philosophers who said that man's will to power is his greatest temptation. It's his greatest sin.

We go back all the way to the fall, the idea of you can be equal with God. You can have the same power as God the same knowledge of God. It goes in, in coming back to that, that's perhaps at the core of our sinfulness and of our depravity is this desire for power and power used selfishly. But as you were talking, I was just thinking **as a sociologist could we look at society through the lens of sociology and say that it really, in many ways, power, fear and violence and particularly in the case of fear and violence, their opposites are really the stuff of sociology, right?**

It's the Yeah. Yeah. Those are the things that always are in play when you have a community of people. Am I thinking like a sociologist? I guess that's what I'm asking.

[00:26:15] **Andrew Whitehead:** Yeah, no, I think you are. And I think that's an important point. And one of the things that I think is useful from the field of sociology or social sciences is that there's nothing necessarily unique about Christianity or even America that we see this struggle with floating into religious nationalism. So if we look at Christianity throughout history, it's been used by other countries, to maintain a religious nationalism, to benefit a particular group to move that country away from actually living out Christian principles.

And as we look at other countries, even today there are other world religions, right? Undergird religious nationalism. And so I think then we're getting to your point where when we're looking at civil society, nation states, there's always going to be this push and pull, and religion, whether

it's Christianity or otherwise can always be, used and I think abused in different ways to hurt some groups and benefit other groups. And so that's where as Christians or as American citizens, I think it's important for us to really wrestle with that and to not too easily, take it for granted. Because as groups and nations and civil societies operate, like you said, violence, power, fear, threat, these are things that can always be in the mix.

And so as Christians thinking through how do we relate to power? How do we faithfully relate to a sense of group fear and threat? How do we faithfully relate to this idea of violence? How should Christians be living out the call of Jesus and the gospel in relation to these things. And I think by doing that, then we're able to move towards expressions of Christianity that don't fall into the traps of Christian nationalism, that allow us to be faithful Christians, to be patriots, to love our country, love the people around us and to move towards flourishing for all.

[00:28:12] **AD:** Can God still do today what he did in the first century church? If we know that he can. And why aren't most of us experiencing his power in our churches and in our personal lives? In the latest book release from Denison Forum, titled Bold Faith, First Century Lessons for 21st Century Christians, Dr. Jim Denison answers that question through a cultural commentary of the Book of Acts. We encourage you to request your copy of Bold Faith today at [dfpodcast.org](http://dfpodcast.org).

**Mark Turman:** In the end of the category, Andrew of misery loves company. Okay. One of the things that was challenging me in reading me reading this book and working through your material is. It is really a call in many ways to repentance and that's never particularly easy to hear or receive.

And I want people to be ready for that. And yet at the same time, just listening to you just now, this understanding that nationalism and the wrong pursuit and use of power is not simply an American problem, not simply a problem that Christians in America sometimes get wrong, but there are multiple expressions of this throughout history, both Christian and non Christian.

If you were to go into many parts of the world, there would be an Islamic nationalism that is very similar in terms of its idolatry and it's wrongness. We might say that there are expressions of Jewish nationalism that are unhealthy. This idea again, this idea of we should be exalted above and privileged above everyone else, even to the exclusion of other groups it is this zero sum game philosophy is that we must win, which means they must lose. Yeah and that's not simply limited to Americans. It's not simply limited to Christian Americans who may have fallen victim and gotten pulled into this idea of a warped understanding of the gospel and its application to our civic life.

But it happens all over the world and it's been happening through the centuries. In, in that sense, you're identifying a problem that is pervasive to human nature is what I'm getting at, right?

[00:30:34] **Andrew Whitehead:** Yeah, no, I think that's really well put. And so in some ways it should, both challenge us and encourage us that it isn't as though I'm over here saying that the whole problem is Christianity, right?

Or the whole problem is America. But As Americans, as Christians, this is our problem, right? I want us to look inward to recognize, own that while we may not have taken part in some of these historical acts, we still live in a culture where those, the echoes of those historical acts and realities still echo today.

And so what can we do? What can we be a part of in repairing and moving towards flourishing? And I think that's the key point is that we are all part of, in a sense, part of the problem, but we can then be a part of the solution. And so I do recognize that, calls to repentance and being uncomfortable are never fun never really enjoyable, but I think they're life giving.

And so if we want to move towards life, and especially to do the what I think is the right thing, which is to move towards those that have been harmed, marginalized, crushed, as they're telling us their experiences and stories, I think as Christians, we should be broken hearted and want to move towards them and ensure that they no longer suffer like they have over the centuries or over the decades.

And so that's all part two of the what I'm trying to call people to what I'm trying to call myself to with this journey and with this book.

[00:32:08] **Mark Turman:** So help me here. Because there's a three-word phrase that's often found in your book that I would call this a conversation lightning rod in the culture today.

Okay. And and I want to, I want you to unpack it for me. Because I think what you're doing is using this term as a sociological historical framework that we need to understand, but here's the lightning rod. Okay. White Christian nationalism, right? If you say those words in our culture, generally, if you say those words around the Thanksgiving dinner table you have put something on the table that is like touching the third rail. Yeah, sure.

**But when you use that term or that phrase white Christian nationalism, why are you using it?**

Why are you using that phrase? And what are you trying? To call out and in terms of this issue, you're it took me a while to, to personally and this is where my own sense of of knowing myself and my own history and seeing it through your eyes and seeing it reflected back to me this idea

of you're not trying to attack a particular group. But you're acknowledging the historical cultural realities of our country, right? But let me get out of the way and let you answer around that terminology.

[00:33:40] **Andrew Whitehead:** Yeah, no, I really appreciate you sharing that and how the experience, how it was for you as you read that. And Mark, I think that you were stating it perfectly that it isn't an attack as though you should feel or I should feel guilty for being born a white American because again, it isn't as though we chose that, but it is an acknowledgement of a particular history here in the U.S. that goes back before even the dawn of the U. S. that recognizes how the Christian faith has been used to create and perpetuate relationships among the people here that elevated some groups, usually white landowning men, historically to the detriment of other groups, whether it was indigenous peoples that lived here, black folks that we took from Africa and enslaved here and on through the years.

And when we're talking about white Christian nationalism, what I'm trying to do is not talk about the skin color of a person that might embrace Christian nationalism, but talking about that Christian nationalism, a part of it has historically created and sustained these ethno-racial lines around who is and can be idealized as a a model American, right?

When we're thinking of a real America or a true American, it generally falls along this idea of white Americans have historically had the greatest access to the benefits of being American and that is a historical reality that I think is still with us that empirically is there. It's true.

And so wrestling with that as Christians again, understanding that part of being Christian in the world today is recognizing that we are handed a particular faith that was part of societies before us. And so acknowledging what they got wrong and what we need to do better. And a part of this again is wrestling with some of the darker aspects of American history.

So I'll just share personally and again, this is my personal story where I'm at with it may not resonate for everyone, but as I read more about the history of lynching in the U. S. And I would hear about, black Americans being terrorized in that way. And in one particular story, just being taken and beaten in the street and treated just worse than anything.

It's not even treating them like animals. It's treating them as, not even, not human, not animal or anything. And then recognizing that, the 10 to 20, 000 people at this one particular lynching that were around it. Many of them were Christians, right? And recognizing that if I was in that time period, where would I have been?

What would I have been thinking and doing? And recognizing that there's a part of me that's reflected in that and trying to think through in this moment of time, how can I move towards a

Christianity that would ensure that I wouldn't make the same mistakes? That white Christians made in that moment because I know that we all look back now and we can recognize how heinous that was. But we also have to recognize that a majority of white Americans in some of those communities maybe didn't actively take part, but they weren't actively opposing it or speaking out against it.

And so as my personal journey, that's what really started to, that was one of the things that really made me wrestle with this and trying to think of where are those hidden aspects where I'm too comfortable with kind of the culture around me. That could be pushing me towards not truly loving my neighbor, those who are being marginalized, those are being harmed confronting even my own people, the only group that accepts me where we might be getting something wrong.

And so I think that's part of that wrestling. And so when we're talking about white Christian nationalism it's really just recognizing that American history, our culture has tended to benefit White Americans as a group again, not individuals because I know there are many white Americans that, aren't rich.

It's not saying that they're all doing better off. But when we look at the whole group, it's always been and done better than other minority groups. And Christian nationalism has been a part of ensuring that this stays, that it stays that way. And so that's part of us wrestling with that history.

[00:38:17] **Mark Turman:** Yeah. And let me see if I can lend a personal example to that as well. And that this is not a call to say that everything that you've been taught about the history of America is wrong. It's not that claim, right? That everything you've been taught about America and America's development or anything is wrong.

But I'll give you an example a little bit of testimony and then get you to comment So a few years ago four or five years ago I was invited to a very brief quick trip to Washington DC with a group of pastors and There was a particular agenda for us to talk about and learn some things that maybe we thought we knew but didn't know.

One of the things that was included in that trip and in the agenda was some time at the African American History Museum. And by my own admission, having been raised in the South in East Texas I would have told you I probably would have never on my own gone into that museum, which in and of itself speaks something, right?

It does, yeah. But when I went into the museum, one of the things I encountered that was completely new to me was the story of Emmett Till. This young man from Chicago who was spending time with extended family in the South and there was some kind of confrontation between him and a white older woman, and it resulted in this young man, 14, 15 years old, being

murdered and thrown into the river thought to be never seen again, but then his body recovered and anyway, it became a very significant movement in a very significant event within the growing movement of civil rights. And I was just astounded that I had never heard of his name, never heard even one bit of the story. Not long after that I was in an academic seminar and there was it was a mixed seminar with both blacks and whites. And I asked this African American man who was in the seminar with me, what is it that the African American community wants?

And that triggered a conversation that lasted for the better part of two hours. Wow. And what I today take away from that is what I heard from him expressing this on behalf of African Americans is look, we're not telling you that all of your history and all of your history books are wrong. We're telling you they're incomplete.

They're and we're asking for you, particularly as Christian white people to be willing to listen to some more of the story and to be willing to let other chapters be added in that are hard in many ways for you to hear and for you to reconcile with, but they are important chapters nonetheless. And can we at least start at the place of adding in those conversations, adding in those chapters? That's part of what I hear you calling for in this book is a willingness by those who, by a lot of different factors, have ended up in places of opportunity and privilege and status. And the call of Christ is to use that position for good and for the good of all. Am I interpreting you correctly?

[00:41:46] **Andrew Whitehead:** Yeah, no, it's really well put and I appreciate you sharing that story. I was able to visit that museum this past spring for the first time. And yeah, I had the same experience where these were some of the stories that I'd heard, but there was always something else too, where I'd never heard of that.

And it does change the complexion of looking at where we are now and why, right? It isn't by historical accident that the wealth of white Americans is 13 times higher than the wealth of other minorities in the U. S. And again, it isn't just that there are individual differences, but these are parts of a history, and I really like, how you talk about, or just shared with it isn't as though the histories we were taught were wrong, but they were incomplete.

And so what are the other stories that we need to be hearing, listening to, learning from, wrestling with? And part of white Christian nationalism is essentially creating kind of an ignorance to that story, or putting on blinders, where we just focus on the things and stories we want that make us feel comfortable or that, aren't causing us to wrestle with difficult aspects. And that's where I think that again, misses the call of Christ as you shared, where we are called into the difficult conversations, into the difficult spaces.

And just as you said, I am calling for those of us who have been blessed privilege, however you want to define it in the U. S., that we would leverage that for the good of all right so that it isn't as though we now can't have. access to any good things, but that we realize that that access should be opened up to everyone. And that's what we can work towards, whether it is other Christians or religious minorities or Americans of no religious faith that we can create a world and communities where all can flourish just like us.

And it's going to cause and to do that, we have to recognize that we are just one seat at the table. We're no longer at the head of the table, right? That we're operating in a political system that I think can really work well, right? A pluralistic democratic society. But to do that, we have to recognize that we don't get to be at the head of the table, but that we're at the table and that we work with those around us to do what we can to listen, learn, grow, develop and move towards a place where yeah, others can flourish too. And that's what we should hope

[00:44:15] **Mark Turman:** for. And that's helpful because. I could see somebody reading this book or reading a portion of this book and coming to what I sometimes encounter in reading and conversations, which is, okay, so what you're saying is that white Americans and particularly white American males are the source of all evil. And that's a really poor way of hearing this conversation because what this is a call to every person, including those who are white Americans, white male Americans, white female Americans, whatever level of influence power opportunity you have, it's not just simply about you doing well. It's about all of us doing well.

And talk about that, Andrew, from the standpoint of how fear attacks our hopefully we have the desire and the intent. **But how does fear try to trip us up if we come to a better, clearer, biblical understanding of using whatever place or position or power or status that we have been given or that we have achieved, how does fear work against us and what does the gospel call us to in that dynamic?**

[00:45:37] **Andrew Whitehead:** Yeah, this was one part of the book that, that was really, insightful to me to really have to work through, right? Because it isn't talking about like personal fear, anxiety, those are very real things, but really thinking of it as at a group level, right?

When we're told and given messages that: Hey, you are a part of this group and this whole group needs to be afraid or to feel threatened. And we see that a lot in news media across various types of news media. But we're, constantly being told because again, that generates motivation, right?

When people as a group feel threatened or scared, that gets them motivated. It gets them out there, voting in a particular way, being involved. And so as Christians, I think whenever we're hearing messages that are pushing us towards a feelings of fear or threat, where we want to circle



the wagons and we aren't moving out into the world to try and benefit the world, but we're trying to defend against the world, right?

Is it us for them or us against them? And so really weighing, whether it's, Sunday service from the pulpit or the... The news that we listen to and consume, what we read online, really checking in and thinking, is this pushing me to want to live and benefit to and sacrifice for those around me or to move against them and put up walls and try to defend against this other group?

And I think that's where the gospel for us as we try to follow Jesus really should push us towards Christians for the world, not against the world. That we should be out willing to give and be a part of conversations, be a part of the flourishing of others, whether it is giving money or, defending access to civil society and being able to live and work and worship or not worship.

Being a part of that, rather than moving towards we need to be able to have a say in how this is structured. It's our way or the highway. We need to make sure that, we are not kicked out or, our power taken away. All of those types of things. I think that's what pushes us away from living for folks rather than against other folks.

And so I think that's where fear really plays into it.

[00:47:57] **Mark Turman:** And getting into some kind of a nuanced understanding of that is really important that as Christians, the Bible does tell us that, that we need to fear the devil and there are things that we really need to be concerned about.

But fear is something that God really does a lot to deliver us from and and that we're not intended by God as Christians to live from a perspective of fear and from a motivation of fear. And what seems to sometimes drive us from my perspective is that fear gets the better of us. And then we start imposing theocratic ideas onto this onto American civil life.

And we'd like you to talk a little bit about that from the standpoint, because a lot of what your book is speaking to, at least in the perspective of politics and community lives is a better, clearer understanding of what we really mean by religious liberty. Yeah. Because, Christians in many ways were in the founding of our country, not perfectly, but significantly in the forefront of calling for a robust understanding of religious liberty that did not favor any one religion or expression of Christianity or others religion, but it was mostly differing interpretations and understandings of Christian faith that were significantly at odds with each other, right?

And but today we would say that, okay, a real understanding of religious liberty doesn't favor any one religion or group or subgroups within that. **Talk about how your book is really a call to a**

better pursuit of civil religious liberty in our country and not a kind of a twisted, theocratic approach to our civil government.

[00:50:03] **Andrew Whitehead:** Yeah, this is a really important conversation and one that as we use those terms, religious liberty or religious freedom being really clear and specific about what we're talking about because there are groups that are using those terms, religious liberty, religious freedom to try to impose Christian values, beliefs on everyone else, right?

That everyone else has to abide by these or recognize these as central or in some of their own words, to return the U. S. to what they see as its Judeo Christian foundations, that type of thing. But as you point out, whether it's the first colonists coming over, or the advent of the United States when they were talking about religious liberty or freedom.

It was that the government, couldn't have a say in how you worship and what you worship. But now it's been redefined where it means that Americans should be able to bring their private religious beliefs into the public square and ensure that others have to abide by those it's being defined in that way. And I think that's where as Christians we fail to love those around us because we have to recognize not everybody holds certain beliefs due to their religion or whatever else in the same way that we do.

But when we're saying that now they have to abide by those and again, this comes down to what we're talking about and how, and being a part of that conversation. Because it could be that my religion or my religious beliefs encourage me to want to go and defend access to the vote, right? And so again, that's me bringing my religion into the public sphere.

But if there are other groups, religious or non religious or otherwise, that are also a part of that, it can be fine that I'm encouraged and motivated by my religious faith to do that. But again, I'm working in conjunction with those around me. Instead of saying that just because my religion says this should be it, now everybody else has to follow suit.

And so I think part of it is just recognizing, are we trying to elevate our Christian faith over and above others to where they might feel uncomfortable or that they're less than in the social sphere, or are we moving in a way that is listening to the needs and motivations of those around us being a part of those conversations and trying to be a part of a civil society and community where again, everyone has access to having a say and being a part of that conversation.

And so when religious freedom and liberty is weaponized to elevate a Christian voice over and above others? I think that's where we need to have a little alarm go off and be a little skeptical and say, I am a Christian too, but this looks like we're saying that, my Christian beliefs or this Christian's beliefs should be over and above everyone else's. And how might it be perceived for

other religious groups or non religious Americans? What are they saying? And being a part of that conversation.

[00:52:57] **Mark Turman:** So much that we could talk about, but just time for maybe one or two more questions. But **so much of what you talk about in this book finds its application, particularly when it comes to issues of race, racism, and to the treatment of foreigners and immigrants.**

Talk just a little bit about what you're trying to convey, because that's really where from a public policy standpoint, as well as from just being a good neighbor on your street where, that's really where these things start to find application. What's your call in those particular areas for us?

We've got significant issues in both categories. This season has been challenging for us in race relations, but really has hopefully create an opportunity for us to come and say, okay, we need to do some more really diligent work here. We didn't solve all of that in the 60s. And we have, there's a call here for renewed effort. And then as it applies to immigration, talk about what you're trying to point to in those areas.

[00:53:59] **Andrew Whitehead:** Yeah, I think, what it comes down to with we're looking at racism or xenophobia and fear of immigrants or refugees I use those two as examples of the three idols of Christian nationalism and how they get worked out, right?

And how they push us towards or push us away from what I think is a Christlike example of Christians loving their neighbors. And so when we're talking about race recognizing that this desire for power, fear of the out group, violence, over and over Christians have been a part of that type of violence and elevating over, racial minority groups, whether it's black Americans those from Asia or anything else.

And so when we're looking at race it's really recognizing that this country is relatively recent in allowing racial and ethnic minorities to be full participants in democracy, is one example. And I think Christians should recognize that it wasn't until the 60s and when it was, fully available.

And since then, there have been, backlashes and drawbacks to that. And so as American Christians, recognizing that history, and again, not being afraid of the difficult conversations, but then looking towards what can we build that is new? What can we build that is more free, that is welcoming?

Whether it's immigrants and refugees coming from other countries or racial and ethnic minorities that are living here today recognizing that the U S hasn't worked. for them in the same way that

it's worked for white Americans. And yeah, again, recognizing that as Christians, we should be focused on, we should desire these groups to flourish as well.

And when we look at the empirical data, they aren't. For one example, the maternal death rate for black women is two times higher than white women and black babies are more likely to die within the first year in the U. S. than white babies. And so looking at that, we recognize there's something isn't working.

And so going to these groups, listening to how and what can change and then being a part of that. I think that is a call of Christianity, a beauty of the gospel that I hope that we move toward. And part of that, again, is confronting and opposing Christian nationalism, which would want to say that this country, needs to get back to where it was founded and generally that benefits just one group rather than all.

And yeah, in those chapters trying to really bring out how these things get played out when we're looking at racial religious minorities or immigrants and refugees.

[00:56:37] **Mark Turman:** Yeah, really some really helpful insight into that. We'd love to keep talking, but I want to give you the last word. So here's how I envisioned this when I was getting ready for our talk, which is you find yourself in the line of the coffee shop looking for your favorite coffee that morning.

And the line's a little bit long and the guy in front of you says, Hey, who are you and then you get to talking about your work and you say I wrote this book. I found the, just as a personal endorsement, I found the book to be very accessible and very readable. Which is not always true and stuff that we pick up but the book is very accessible around a very challenging set of conversations and a very important topic.

So tell us just as a final word, who were you writing for? And if you were standing in that coffee line and you had a couple of minutes to tell this guy what your book was about and why he should read it, what would you say?

[00:57:33] **Andrew Whitehead:** Yeah, no, I love this question. I wrote the book to fellow Christians and really as I thought back to where I grew up, the community that I was a part of it's to folks, in that community or ones like that, right?

Where these are loving people. They loved me, raised me. If I needed help, I could probably call some of them up and they would come help me even today, right? 30 years later, but I do recognize that the taken for grantedness of Christian nationalism is still there. And **so the faith**

that I was raised in of loving our neighbor, recognizing that so often Christians in America move towards policies and positions that fail to love our neighbors.

And so I was taught this faith, but then living it out, I saw that there was a difference. And in some ways, writing to Christians to show that they can leave behind these aspects of Christian nationalism, but it doesn't mean they're leaving behind the Christian faith, right? That there are expressions of Christianity that move towards a vision of the kingdom of God and of the gospel that is beautiful is focused on us sacrificing leveraging what we've been giving to benefit others. And I think that's a beautiful representation. And it isn't to say that there aren't other faiths or Americans that do that as well, but trying to write to Christians to say, this doesn't mean you have to leave Christianity behind.

There are beautiful expressions of Christianity that we can move towards. And so for the person in the coffee shop line, I would want to say that I am on a journey. This book is a part of that journey and I recognize everyone else is on a journey and so wherever you're at on that journey. I hope that this book provides aspects to think through, think about, wrestle with, but not that it's a final word or that it's the only word but that it's just a part of that journey to hopefully move us and me included, towards an expression of Christianity.

Those around me recognize as based in love and a desire for flourishing when sometimes and historically the opposite has been true. And so that's what I would say that yeah, we're on this journey together and I hope this book can be helpful in some way to those that are journeying alongside me.

[00:59:55] **Mark Turman:** Well, it's been helpful to me and challenging as it should be, I would say in the ongoing and ever challenging work to be even more biblical more holy in the practice of our faith in at every level on a personal level as well as on a public and civic level Andrew, thank you for that.

Thank you for the book and for our audience again. The book is [American Idolatry: How Christian Nationalism Betrays the Gospel and Threatens the Church](#) it's out on all of the major platforms. You can get it at all of the major booksellers and we would encourage you to do that And share this podcast if it's been helpful and insightful for you so that others can be a part of the conversation and learn more about the work of Andrew Whitehead we pray that god's blessing would be on you my friend and that Things would go well not only with this book, but with your other work As you continue your journey, we're grateful to have you with us today.

[01:00:53] **Andrew Whitehead:** Oh, thank you so much I really do appreciate the conversation and just yeah being able To talk about these topics that can be hard. But yeah, so appreciate Yeah, being able to be with you today.

[01:01:06] **Mark Turman:** Thank you and thank you to our audience again Please rate review us on your podcast platform and share this with others We are grateful to have you as a part of the denison forum podcast conversation until next time God bless you.