



E Pluribus Unum

Brian Mattson - 07/05/2026

Yesterday, we celebrated 250 years of our nation. This holiday has grown, flourished, and some would say devolved into a spectacle consisting of hot dogs, popsicles, and consumer-grade explosives. Handheld explosives for all ages, from the least dangerous growing snakes to the earthshaking artillery shells. This uniquely American holiday, I daresay, is unmatched in revelry and patriotism for one's nation. Of course it's more than those things. For some, it's just a night to endure with beloved pets as the rumbles and bangs echo for hours. Others plan vacations in quieter locales or foreign countries. Some just soak up the fireworks from the bow of a boat or the safety of a backyard.

As I've gotten older, I don't really shoot off many fireworks anymore. For years, Jessica and I have gone to a 4th of July party at one of my best friend's houses. We've been going there for so many years that it's now known only as his parent's house because we aren't 17 anymore, no matter how much it still feels that way. After the hot dogs and hamburgers have been devoured and twilight begins, we pick up our camp chairs and walk out onto one of the fairways at Twin Oaks Country Club to wait for the fireworks to begin. Jess and I started this tradition when we were in high school and now we are taking our own two kids. I'm hoping they will always just want to watch fireworks. I'm praying they never want to do the things I did with fireworks when I was younger. Do any of you look back and wonder how so many of us survived our teen years?

I remember those times fondly, but when I actually think about them, I mean really dig deep, I just see a bunch of dumb teenage boys. We would go to the fireworks stands and buy box after box of bottle rockets, then we'd divide into two teams and shoot them at each other across parking lots. No eye protection. No ear protection. Most of us were wearing shorts and flip flops, tripping over ourselves trying not to get hit with a flying incendiary device. This will forever be something that I just shake my head at.

You know, I read articles sometimes with titles like—*10 things ER doctors and nurses will never do*—and usually in the top two or three is fireworks. And we sell more than a billion of dollars of these things every year. Did you know that Missouri is the number one state for fireworks sales per capita? Boy, we love blowing things up! When I look back on those days, though I think of them as fun, that's really a warped perspective. It was dangerous, reckless, stupid. You name it. It was all of those things. Still, it's easy to reflect on times gone by with rose-colored glasses.

We all do it. Both in our personal lives and as a country. I've been watching Ken Burns's latest PBS documentary, *The American Revolution*, and our country was a mess back in the 1700s. The colonies were exchanging barbs with Britain. Skirmishes popped up here and there as tensions got heated. Then, on July 4th, 1776, a group of prominent people—all white men—got together to officially sever the connection with England and King George III. That was a big deal. Monumental. The signing of the Declaration of Independence was groundbreaking and earthshaking—more so than a bunch of fireworks ever could be. This document made some novel claims about governance, self-identity, and the unalienable rights afforded to all people. It is a beautiful and historic document and I'm happy I get to celebrate what that moment grew into over 250 years, but to look back on that moment or document as perfection is misguided. We didn't have it all together back then and we don't now.

There are some in our country who are looking back at that moment as something we ought to return to. When they see that iconic painting that hangs in the US Capitol Rotunda, they see a seismic spiritual shift. A moment of divine intervention. A time when humanity figured out God's will. The truth is much more complicated than that idealized image. This painting captures a moment, but the Declaration of Independence, and later the Constitution and Bill of Rights, are *aspirational* documents. They describe a preferred *future*. One we are still striving for, not a time when we had it all figured out.

The Last Supper painting hanging here is much the same. It helps us remember the night when Jesus instituted Holy Communion, the Lord's Supper, but those guys in that painting didn't have everything figured out. Jesus was preparing them for the hard work ahead. Work we carry on today. That painting is nice to look at and admire, but it's a reminder that the meal we share is real sustenance to continue following Jesus and serving people in real and meaningful ways. Both paintings are moments to remember, but they are impossible to travel back to. So we have to take their core tenets with us into the future.

There are a growing number of people in our country who are pushing back against taking those aspirational ideals into our shared *future* as a country, and instead are trying to take us *back* to a time when they were just true for a certain group of people. The term Christian Nationalist has become a common word in our lexicon, but what exactly do we mean when we say that? To understand it better, because we can't just lump everyone we may disagree with into a box, we first need to understand the word nationalism.

One definition of nationalism is an intense allegiance to a political state and/or national identity, which on its own doesn't sound terrible. In fact, it often has positive attributes like patriotism, national pride, or service to one's country. Typically when we hear the word nationalism, though, it takes that definition a step further. It doesn't define the nation by its geographical boundaries or all the people living inside that region, but rather by a

preferred identity of people living in a country. That can be racial, religious, or a political ideology. Of course, we all know the extreme example of this being Nazi Germany, when anyone who wasn't the *preferred* identity of "true" Germans was pushed out, even murdered.

Adam Hamilton says that **"the danger of nationalism starts with idolatry. What happens in nationalism, regardless of your religious faith, the nation, ultimately, becomes for many people God."**

In Christian Nationalism, what happens is that people bind a certain Christian ideology with nationalism. Not all nationalists morph into Christian Nationalists, but when it happens, it usually takes shape with a fundamental interpretation of Christianity. There have been forms of this in very public ways, such as the Ku Klux Klan, dating back to the 1860s, but up until about ten years ago, it was a much quieter, behind-the-scenes manifestation. And it wasn't always race-based. It also took the form of anti-Irish sentiment or anti-Catholic. Sometimes it was anti-immigrant in any form.

Adherents of this movement or perspective will often claim one or more of several points. Here are four of the most common:

- 1. America was founded as a Christian Nation and should remain so.**
- 2. Christians should retain a privileged place in American life and culture.**
- 3. Christians should exercise in greater dominion, authority, and leadership in America.**
- 4. America's identity, values, and laws should be shaped by Christian values.**

Before we dig a little deeper into these points, we need to clarify that Christian Nationalism has no resemblance to Jesus' ministry, nor does it imitate the core tenets laid out in the Declaration of Independence. You can be a Christian and love this country without being a Christian Nationalist.

Now, let's start with the first point that this country was founded as a Christian nation. That is absolutely not the case. Yes, the first Europeans who arrived on the land were Puritans, practicing a fundamental form of Christianity. Yes, many of our Founding Fathers were Christians. But there wasn't an agreed upon set of religious doctrine at the second Continental Congress. That's because it wasn't a spiritual exercise, but a political and civic initiative. There was a wide range of religious affiliations and belief systems of the delegates. Coming to consensus was hard work, and the core principles in our founding documents were what they could all agree on. If they had wanted to declare that this new nation was for Christians only, they could have. But they didn't. The founders and framers of our country established a precedent that all people were allowed to observe their religion without government interference or determination.

Points two and three say Christians should hold a privileged place in American life and culture, and they should have greater authority and elevated leadership. Neither of these two pass the smell test of Jesus followers, namely because they seek control and power over other people, cultures, or ideas. This goes against the meekness, humbleness, and gentleness Christians are called to embrace. Yes, I want good, upstanding, moral people to be leaders and serve in elevated positions, but I want this on the basis of true service to people, not for power or prestige.

And point four says America's values and laws should be shaped by Christian ideals. This is the part where I can make it make sense as long as we can agree on what ideals we are talking about. If what we mean is that our laws reflect the moral teachings of Jesus, then I am all for it. If the intention is something different altogether, then you've lost me. I hope that our laws reflect the compassion, mercy, and grace Jesus offered to all people from all walks of life. Not just the people that looked like him or agreed with him or were from the same region. Because the Kingdom of God that Jesus urged his followers to seek was not based on boundaries or geography then, and it

isn't now either. The United States of America and the Kingdom of God are not synonyms. Jesus famously answered Pontius Pilate by saying, "My kingdom is not of this world." Jesus was telling Pilate, a political appointee, that he was building up the spiritual, mental, and emotional parts of people. He was less concerned with the edicts and orders from a selected group of religious elites or politicians forced upon others who don't see things with the same lens.

Even more, Jesus showed how to be compassionate, merciful, and kind to *all* people regardless of their faith or ideology. His interactions crossed boundaries between men and women, Jews and Gentiles, Romans and Israelites, sick and healthy. Jesus blurred lines. People were people, not problems. Christian Nationalism sees people who are different as problems to solve.

I've said this before, but I will say it again, and *keep* reiterating it: our diversity as people is not a bug, it's a feature. People, customs, cultures...these things really teach us about humankind. There is a depth and breadth to humanity which is a reflection of the infinite Creator of the universe.

Furthermore, our diversity as Christians is important to the global Body of Christ. Our forms of worship, the understandings of grace, forgiveness, and salvation. These things help expound and expand this patchwork quilt of believers. The skills, gifts, and talents of Jesus followers provide new ways to understand just how big the love of God is and just how small the differences are between people. All these things added together help create and form Jesus' physical body today. Those aren't my thoughts. The apostle Paul says it:

You can easily enough see how this kind of thing works by looking no further than your own body. Your body has many parts—limbs, organs, cells—but no matter how many parts you can name, you're still one body. It's exactly the same with Christ. By means of

his one Spirit, we all said good-bye to our partial and piecemeal lives. We each used to independently call our own shots, but then we entered into a large and integrated life in which he has the final say in everything. (This is what we proclaimed in word and action when we were baptized.) Each of us is now a part of his resurrection body, refreshed and sustained at one fountain—his Spirit—where we all come to drink. The old labels we once used to identify ourselves—labels like Jew or Greek, slave or free—are no longer useful. We need something larger, more comprehensive.

I want you to think about how all this makes you more significant, not less. A body isn't just a single part blown up into something huge. It's all the different-but-similar parts arranged and functioning together. If Foot said, "I'm not elegant like Hand, embellished with rings; I guess I don't belong to this body," would that make it so? If Ear said, "I'm not beautiful like Eye, transparent and expressive; I don't deserve a place on the head," would you want to remove it from the body? If the body was all eye, how could it hear? If all ear, how could it smell? As it is, we see that God has carefully placed each part of the body right where he wanted it. But I also want you to think about how this keeps your significance from getting blown up into self-importance. For no matter how significant you are, it is only because of what you are a part of.

- 1 Corinthians 12:12-20 MSG

That's from The Message translation, but this all ties together nicely (I hope) on Independence Day weekend because of verse 20. Here's what it sounds like from the NRSV: there are many members yet one body. That sure sounds a lot like our *traditional* national motto. Do you remember it? E pluribus unum. Out of many, one. Christian Nationalism would have us remove parts of our body that it deems unworthy. Christian Nationalism sells a warped

memory instead of a favorable *future*. It sells fear and strife. Us versus them. Exclusion instead of inclusion. It swaps out hope for hate, which is at the exact opposite end of the spectrum from our defining characteristic as followers of Jesus—love.

Our country's past has a lot of warts and scars in it. There is no denying that. Christian Nationalists want to see the past through rose-colored glasses; through warped lenses. Jesus just wants us to take the shades off to see the whole picture with clear eyes. Jesus wants the way in front of us to be so clear that we can't mistake it. And the way forward is with *love* for everyone.

I am so fortunate and thankful to live in this country. This American Experiment has had its ups and downs, that is true. But I sure do love this place. The America I love even more is the one I see in the future, not a rose-colored version of the past. The one that cherishes the *idea* we put to paper 250 years ago but are still aspiring to reach. **We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.**

As we prepare to take communion together, I lift up this painting, not as a place to return to, but an inspiration for the journey ahead. These disciples were sharing a Passover meal. A celebration of God's saving power, God's liberation of the Israelites from Egyptian slavery. I pray this meal strengthens and sustains you as we work for true liberty for *all* people because God's table knows no bounds. I pray that it gives you the power to look beyond our present political realities and to make room for more people to find out about this Jesus we talk about so much, who has love, love, love. For everyone.