

## Christ vs. Empire

### *The Gospel of Luke – The Acts of the Apostles*

## Christ vs. Empire, Part 4: Pentecost vs. White Christian Nationalism

### *Acts 2:1 – 11*

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#### Introduction

We are in part four of our series *Christ vs. Empire*. We are seeing how the kingdom of God, with King Jesus on the throne, challenges the Empires of biblical times and our times. In week 1, we looked at Jesus Above the Empires, in the book of Daniel, chapter 7, to see a prediction of Jesus enthroned in the mist of the beastly empires. In week 2, we looked at Empire, Exploitation, and Jesus' Resistance in Luke 3 where John the Baptist and Jesus speaking to the Jewish tax collectors who worked for the Roman Empire and against their own people that they had to absorb some of the cost of that injustice by making no personal salary. In week 3, we looked at Police Terror and Jesus' Peace also in Luke 3. The topic for today is Pentecost vs. White Christian Nationalism.

Why are white evangelicals more likely to believe that people in poverty only have themselves to blame,<sup>1</sup> as opposed to government programs that funded white flight to the suburbs, and then school systems that are funded by local property taxes, which are unequal? It's because they tend to believe that the United States is a Christian nation, so it must be people's own fault. Why are they more likely to support separating Latin American children from their migrant parents who are seeking asylum,<sup>2</sup> which is a human right in the view of the United Nations? Because they are more likely than any other religious group to say "immigrants represented a threat to America's customs and values."<sup>3</sup> In 2018, 71% of white evangelicals saw police brutality as "isolated incidents" and not part of a broader pattern.<sup>4</sup> As of 2020, that seems to have changed, but it took a lot to change their minds. Anecdotally,

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<sup>1</sup> Julie Zauzmer, "Christians Are More Than Twice as Likely to Blame a Person's Poverty on Lack of Effort," *Washington Post*, August 3, 2017; <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2017/08/03/christians-are-more-than-twice-as-likely-to-blame-a-persons-poverty-on-lack-of-effort/> and Chauncy DeVega, "So Much for Christian Charity: Evangelicals Blame the Poor for Poverty, Which Makes Them a Lot Like Other Republicans," *Salon*, August 10, 2017; <https://www.salon.com/2017/08/10/so-much-for-christian-charity-evangelicals-blame-the-poor-for-poverty-which-makes-them-a-lot-like-other-republicans/>. Perhaps this contributes to why other communities are criminalizing homelessness: See Pam Fessler, "U.S. Cities Face Challenges In Reducing Homeless Population," *NPR*, December 11, 2015; <https://www.npr.org/2015/12/11/459392786/u-s-cities-face-challenges-in-reducing-homeless-population> who says in some cities, we are seeing "an increase in laws to criminalize homelessness, to make it illegal to camp, to panhandle, to, in fact, feed people—large groups of people—outside."

<sup>2</sup> Philip Bump, "The Group Least Likely to Think the U.S. Has a Responsibility to Accept Refugees? Evangelicals," *Washington Post*, May 24, 2018; <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/politics/wp/2018/05/24/the-group-least-likely-to-think-the-u-s-has-a-responsibility-to-accept-refugees-evangelicals/> and Brandon Showalter, "White Evangelicals Most Supportive of Separating Migrant Children From Parents, But Most Oppose: Poll," *Christian Post*, June 27, 2018; <https://www.christianpost.com/news/white-evangelicals-most-supportive-separating-migrant-children-from-parents-prri-poll.html> refers to Daniel Cox, "Growing Divide on Immigration and America's Moral Leadership," *PRRI*, June 26, 2018; <https://www.prri.org/research/growing-divide-on-immigration-and-americas-moral-leadership/>.

<sup>3</sup> Betsy Cooper, Daniel Cox, Rachel Lienesch, Robert P. Jones, "How Americans View Immigrants, and What They Want from Immigration Reform: Findings from the 2015 American Values Atlas," *PRRI*, March 29, 2016; <https://www.prri.org/research/poll-immigration-reform-views-on-immigrants/>. Leonardo Blair, "Majority of White Evangelicals Believe Immigrants Threaten American Values, Study Finds," *Christian Post*, March 29, 2016; <https://www.christianpost.com/news/white-evangelicals-threaten-american-values-prri.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Alex Vandermaas-Peeler, Daniel Cox, Maxine Najle, Molly Fisch-Friedman, Rob Griffin, Robert P. Jones, "Partisan Polarization Dominates Trump Era: Findings from the 2018 American Values Survey," *PRRI*, October 29, 2018; <https://www.prri.org/research/partisan-polarization-dominates-trump-era-findings-from-the-2018-american-values-survey/> find, "White evangelical Protestants stand out for the extent to which they believe recent killings of black men are isolated incidents. More than seven in ten (71%) of white evangelical Protestants say these killings are isolated incidents, a view shared by roughly six in ten white Catholics (63%) and white mainline Protestants (59%). In contrast, only about four in ten (43%) Hispanic Catholics and about one-third of religiously unaffiliated Americans (33%) and Hispanic Protestants (32%) say these killings are isolated incidents. Just 15% of black Protestants identify the recent killings of black men by police as isolated incidents, while more than eight in ten (84%) say they are part of a broader pattern."

it seems like white evangelicals are still more likely than the general population to see Black Lives Matter as a negative, and to say “all lives matter” as a comeback. Why? Because admitting the ongoing racism of the U.S. messes up the story that the U.S. is a virtuous Christian nation.

Have you noticed that calling some white evangelicals “racist” doesn’t seem to matter? Just a few weeks ago, Robert Jones, who is a researcher and statistician at PRRI, the Public Religion Research Institute, which is a non-partisan research group. He published a book called *White Too Long: The Legacy of White Supremacy in American Christianity*. And after designing very well-designed questionnaires and measurements, Robert Jones concluded with good evidence that white evangelicals are more racist than white non-Christian people. White evangelicals are more racist than white non-Christians. Which means there is something about the religious beliefs, theology, and culture of white evangelical Protestants which makes them more racist.<sup>5</sup>

Now as much as I think these things are true and need to be discussed, it doesn’t seem to make a dent in the thinking of white evangelicals themselves. Many white evangelicals let the word “racist” just roll off their backs as if they are the victims of some colossal misinterpretation. Which means that there must be some other issue that is at the heart of their beliefs, posture, and perspective. And unless we get to the heart of their misunderstanding and their mistake, these things are just going to roll off their back.

The core belief of many white evangelicals is that the United States is a Christian nation. It’s the reason why sometimes you see the American flag in church sanctuaries. It’s the reason why identity seems related to race, religion, and nation. It’s the reason why you see white evangelicals saying they need to “take back America.” In fact, another book published just a few weeks ago is called *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States*.<sup>6</sup> They believe American once belonged to Christians, so Christians are justified in “taking it back.” Two sociologists of religion who are very concerned about this warn us that we have to take this seriously. Because it certainly started off with white Protestants, it’s primarily white still, but it’s an idea that has spread to Christians who are not white. Another article written by Reverend Doctor Liz Theoharis, co-chair of the Poor People’s Campaign with Reverend William Barber, is titled “How Christian Nationalism in the US Legislates Evil and Punishes the Poor.”<sup>7</sup>

So we are going to take this seriously, not only because this is an election year but because this is an ongoing challenge. This idea is going to be around a long time. We need to be prepared to call it out for a long time. And I’m not saying that you should go debate people right after this message. You might not be in the right place, or be the right person, in any given situation. But I do want you to be in the know and in prayer, so you might be ready to have a real conversation with someone if Jesus gives you that opportunity. We have a responsibility and a role. King David said, “He trains my hands for war.” And this is a spiritual battle. Maybe you’ll want to think a bit

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<sup>5</sup> Robert P. Jones, *White Too Long: The Legacy of White Supremacy in American Christianity* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2020). For online distillations, see Robert P. Jones, “Racism Among White Christians Is Higher Than Among the Nonreligious. That’s No Coincidence.” *NBC News*, July 27, 2020; <https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/racism-among-white-christians-higher-among-nonreligious-s-no-coincidence-ncna1235045> and Leonardo P. Blair, “White Christians More Racist Than Secular Whites, Researcher Robert P. Jones Reveals,” *Christian Post*, July 29, 2020; <https://www.christianpost.com/news/white-christians-more-racist-than-secular-whites-researcher-robert-p-jones-reveals-238140/>. Mike Luo, “American Christianity’s White-Supremacy Problem,” *The New Yorker*, September 2, 2020; <https://www.newyorker.com/books/under-review/american-christianitys-white-supremacy-problem> explores white Catholics and white liberal Protestants in addition to white evangelicals.

<sup>6</sup> Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry, *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

<sup>7</sup> Rev. Dr. Liz Theoharis, “How Christian Nationalism in the US Legislates Evil and Punishes the Poor,” *Common Dreams*, September 28, 2020; <https://www.commondreams.org/views/2020/09/28/how-christian-nationalism-us-legislates-evil-and-punishes-poor> says, “In the Poor People’s Campaign, we often start our organizing meetings by showing a series of color-coded maps of the country. The first has the states that have passed voter suppression laws since 2013; the next, those with the highest poverty rates; then, those that have not expanded Medicaid but have passed anti-LGBTQ laws. And so it goes. Our final map displays the states densest with self-identified evangelical Protestants. I’m sure you won’t be surprised to learn that those maps overlap almost perfectly, chiefly in the Bible Belt, but also in the Midwest, the Mid-Atlantic states, and even in parts of the Northeast and West. The point is to show how inextricably connected the battle for voting rights, healthcare, and other critical resources is to the battle for the Bible. The stakes are measured in the health of the entire nation, because the same politicians who manipulate the Bible and the right to vote to win elections then pass immoral budgets and policies.”

more, read, or talk to me. All of that is great. But now is the time to declare Jesus' commitment to Pentecost, not Christian nationalism. That's the title of this message. Pentecost vs. Christian nationalism.

### **Text and Context**

What is Pentecost? Pentecost is the opposite of nationalism, and the opposite of racism. Pentecost is the event in Acts chapter 2 where Jesus sends his Spirit upon his disciples, and empowers them into a mission – his mission – to every tribe and tongue, every people and every nation, to proclaim him as king. The Spirit empowers them to live in a way that is victorious over the sin in them, and to speak in way that is compelling to others. Pentecost shows us that Jesus does not make Christian nations. Jesus makes Christian people and a Christian movement that cuts across nations and cuts through Empires and cuts down the injustices.

So we're going to look at Acts 2. What is the Book of Acts? Briefly, Acts is the continuation of the Gospel of Luke. The Gospel of Luke is Luke part 1. Acts is Luke part 2. Acts is the story of the early Jesus movement confronting the Roman Empire, launching out in the love, and vision, and life of Jesus. The earliest Christians are accused of saying this: "There is another king, Jesus." That's the scandal, in Acts 17:7. Luke turns his narrator's lens on this encounter in the Greek city of Thessalonica. Some people there say, "These men who have upset the world have come here also, and they all act contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus." See, that's the main point here. This Jesus movement is running around saying, "There is another king, Jesus." That's a dangerous thing in Empires.

### **Pentecost as Jesus' Reign in the Spirit**

So we're going to pick up the story at the beginning. Now in Acts 1, Jesus ascended to his throne as king. He rose up on clouds. If you recall Daniel 7:13 - 14, which we looked at 3 weeks ago, Daniel saw the vision of one like a Son of Man coming on the clouds – going from down to up – to be enthroned by the Ancient of Days, or God the Father. This is why we say there is another king: Jesus. This is why we say we pledge allegiance to him and him alone. It would be completely out of character for the book of Acts to say, "Pledge allegiance to the United States, and through the United States, to Jesus." Nope: There is no second step, no intermediate step, no detour to get to Jesus. It's just "Pledge allegiance to King Jesus, and join his movement."

So in Acts 2, the earliest Christians are there, huddled in a house in Jerusalem. These were Jewish Christians now. And Jesus had called them to love people from all nations. They had a Jewish nationalism of their own *before* they met Jesus. They wanted to just invest in their own nation and what God might do for them as a nation, like: get their land back from the Roman Empire; liberate their capital city, Jerusalem, from the Roman armies; cancel all that debt they owed to Roman bankers. But Jesus sent them out to other people everywhere, to change power dynamics everywhere, not just in their own nation, although he still loved the Jewish community. But to bring the power of God everywhere, not just in their own nation. They didn't have a monopoly on Jesus. NO nation does.

So here they are. What are they doing? They are probably comparing stories and reading the Old Testament and developing leaders. Then, another Jewish holiday rolls around: Pentecost. This word existed before the event. It's based on the word for "fifty," because it's set for fifty days after the weekend of Passover. Passover was the holiday of independence, when God delivered Israel out of Egypt, and slavery to Pharaoh. Fifty days after that, Israel came to Mount Sinai and had this experience with God. So Pentecost was the holiday that remembered Israel meeting with God at Mount Sinai, and Moses going up to God on the mountain *in divine fire*, and God gave the law to Moses, and sent the law down to Israel. So Pentecost was this holiday when Jewish people from all over the world, including the Diaspora, gathered in Jerusalem to remember that day. Here's what happens:

<sup>2:1</sup> When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. <sup>2</sup> And suddenly there came from heaven a noise like a violent rushing wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. <sup>3</sup> And there appeared to them tongues as of fire distributing themselves, and they rested on each one of them. <sup>4</sup> And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit was giving them utterance. <sup>5</sup> Now there were Jews living in Jerusalem, devout men from every nation under heaven. <sup>6</sup> And when this sound occurred, the crowd came together, and were bewildered because each one of them was hearing them speak in his own language. <sup>7</sup> They were amazed and astonished, saying, 'Why, are not all these who are speaking Galileans?' <sup>8</sup> And how is it that we each hear them in our own language to which we were born? <sup>9</sup> Parthians and Medes and Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, <sup>10</sup> Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the districts of Libya around Cyrene,

and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, <sup>11</sup> Cretans and Arabs – we hear them in our own tongues speaking of the mighty deeds of God.’

Now as a church community, we have looked at this passage from other angles: who is the Holy Spirit? How can Christians speak in other languages today? But today, I’m going to focus on the ways it fits first and foremost in the theme of Christ vs. Empire. And it disproves Christian nationalism, and especially white Christian nationalism.

First of all, Pentecost is about Jesus’ new humanity for all humanity. Right before Pentecost, Jesus went up. He took his new humanity up to God the Father, as an offering of love for us, and on our behalf, because we could not purify our own human nature so Jesus did it for us. PRAISE JESUS! THANK YOU, LORD! Because he did what we could not. He conquered human evil, which lives in each of us. Then, on Pentecost, he sent his Spirit down. By his Spirit, Jesus shares his new humanity for all humanity. He sends his Spirit into all his followers, and they speak in all these languages. Why? Because that’s a great representation of how committed Jesus is to going everywhere. Jesus wants to invite people of all tribes and tongues to acknowledge him as King.

Now let’s remind ourselves that this just flowed out of what we see in Jesus’ human life. Jesus of Nazareth, as a human, spoke in more than one language. He spoke Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. There’s solid evidence for that. He might have also spoken Latin, too. Why did Jesus learn those languages as a human being? To speak the heart languages of other people. Now that the Jesus movement is going outside of the land of Israel, Jesus picks up more languages by his Spirit and through his people. Jesus speaks your language. He knows the way your heart speaks and how your mind finds the easiest path to understanding things.

But Jesus makes it clear that he speaks all the other languages, too. Pentecost, in other words, was not a miracle of hearing. If Pentecost had been a miracle of hearing – if God did the miracle in your ear – then how many languages would you hear? Only one. Yours. And yours only. And you might have thought, “Hey! Jesus is for me and my people!” But what about everyone else? You see, that’s the difference: Pentecost was a miracle of *speaking*. The disciples were speaking and God was doing the miracle in their mouths. In other words, if you were there, you would hear other people’s languages, too. So, if you were there, you would hear other people’s language, too. You would know that King Jesus was calling everyone, including you and your people, but not just you.

So right away, the Spirit draws a crowd. The Jewish crowd gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate Pentecost--they hear Hebrew and Aramaic, the languages used by Jews traditionally. But they hear more. And they know right away what the implications are: Jesus is claiming people from everywhere. Not just Jews, but people from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. And they know right from the jump, that no one people has a monopoly on Jesus.

Many white American evangelicals believe that they have a monopoly on Jesus. It comes from the street level view from the Protestant Reformation that the Catholic Church only sucked for centuries until Martin Luther and John Calvin rediscovered the Bible. Then the Anglican Church was corrupt, so the English Puritans came to North America seeking “freedom of religion” and they founded the United States. So, wow, who has the purest form of Christian faith? White evangelical Americans.

But right away, there’s a difference in direction. Jesus’ reign goes outward, outward, outward. Jesus keeps others in mind all the time. Who is the next person? Who are the next people? What is the next language, the next group of people? How can we keep reliving the Pentecost experience? How can we keep expressing other languages? Christian nationalism does not do that. Christian nationalism turns inward, inward, inward. Protect ourselves, protect ourselves.

That was true from the beginning of this country. Let me give you an example of that, and a counterexample. Right here in Boston, there was a debate between two white Christians. John Winthrop was the white Christian nationalist. He led the Puritans. He was governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. He gave the “city on a hill” sermon, saying that the white settlers were a city on a hill. He called Native Americans “savages.” He held three Pequot people in slavery. He believed God was allowing the Puritans to take their land. He believed that if Native peoples ever believed in Jesus, then they would have to join the Puritans and dress like Englishmen, talk in English, and live like Englishmen because the English were more civilized. That’s what white Christian nationalism does. Look inward, protect ourselves, make people like us, not just in faith but also in culture and language.

Roger Williams disagreed. He was a different kind of Christian. He disagreed with John Winthrop and called the Puritans hypocrites. He got kicked out and exiled from Boston. So he founded Providence. He bought the land from the Narragansett people at a fair price. He was the first colonial abolitionist, and abolished slavery in Providence. He believed Christian faith in the public square had to protect human rights and also give freedom of religious conscience, including to wives when they disagreed with their husbands over where to worship.<sup>8</sup> He is the father of the First Amendment of the Bill of Rights to the U.S. Constitution. He was a linguist by training so he fell in love with Native American languages and culture. He said that many Native cultures were superior to English culture, along specific metrics like the gap between what they said they did, and what they actually did. He wanted to share Jesus with the Native peoples and did, but helped them develop Christian expressions of life in Native cultures. He did not make them adopt English ways. Later, he became the best-selling author in the English speaking world on Native Americans. He wrote an encyclopedia about their languages and cultures, and showed them so much respect that Native tribes appreciate him deeply to this day. For a while, there was a flourishing Pentecost in Providence where English and Native believers lived, worked, and learned side by side, and sometimes apart in different communities.

That understanding of a Christian Pentecost, against white Christian nationalism, has been held by some American Christians since then. We see it in a Methodist preacher named William Apess (1798 – 1839), who was Pequot, European and African American. He was the most successful activist for Native Americans before the Civil War, and he considered the most important thing he said was to be against the idea of a white Christian nationalism. We see it in Frederick Douglass, when he pledged himself to Christ and said famously:

“Between the Christianity of this land, and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest possible difference—so wide, that to receive the one as good, pure, and holy, is of necessity to reject the other as bad, corrupt, and wicked. To be the friend of the one, is of necessity to be the enemy of the other. I love the pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ: I therefore hate the corrupt, slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land. Indeed, I can see no reason, but the most deceitful one, for calling the religion of this land Christianity.”<sup>9</sup>

All throughout U.S. history, there have been moments of Pentecost, and Christian believers of all races and ethnicities who were faithful. I think that’s important for us to know, whether we are white or non-white, because we have to engage this idea. I think it’s comforting for me as an Asian American believer in Jesus to know that there has been this thread of faithfulness to Jesus, because this is what we are fighting for. When we as Neighborhood Church of Dorchester to experience the shalom of God with us, this is part of that vision.

Right now, I want to invite Ben Cressy to share with us. Ben challenged his home church in New Hampshire about these issues. I think it’s important to see and hear examples of how white evangelicals might change, and might be persuaded to change.

“For those of you who don’t know some of my story, it’s somewhat applicable to the topic today. I would say I probably by the strictest definition of the word would have to say I identify as a formal white nationalist. That’s a pretty loaded way to label one’s self in today’s climate. I’ll just start off there by saying that because...it’s helpful to put that out there when I talk about my spiritual identity and formation over the last 33 years of my life. Because when we understand who Jesus is and what he does in cleansing us and re-shaping who we are, in order to go wherever he wants us to go, we have to be cognizant of where we come from. There’s a spectrum of where we start and where we wind up running the race. So I try to be pretty cognizant of where we come from in thinking about my Christian identity in particular.

I was born in southern New Hampshire. I’m an only child. Both my parents are devout, now approaching senior citizenry. They would both identify as white evangelical Christians. They are people of incredible integrity who would also self-identify as very patriotic, American citizens. That’s the context of what I was born and raised in. My home church in southern NH, it was not uncommon on memorial Day or the Fourth

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<sup>8</sup> The case of *Joshua Verin v. Providence* (1638) is outstanding. See Edward J. Eberle, “Another of Roger William’s Gifts: Women’s Right to Liberty of Conscience: *Joshua Verin v. Providence* Plantations,” *Roger Williams University*, Spring 2004; [https://docs.rwu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://www.ecosia.org/&httpsredir=1&article=1015&context=law\\_fac\\_fs](https://docs.rwu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://www.ecosia.org/&httpsredir=1&article=1015&context=law_fac_fs).

<sup>9</sup> Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845)

of July to have veterans come down the center aisle of the church. It's not like the Boys and Girls Club. It's a big physically white church with a big white steeple and an affluent town in southern NH. If you can picture the pulpit and choir area behind it, it's embossed with flags all over the world representing the countries that different missionaries affiliated with the church have served in. But on the Fourth of July or other holidays associated with, not the church, but the United States, it's not uncommon to open the church service with retired or active duty veterans who are members of the church presenting the American flag down the center aisle with a national piece of music playing and everyone in the church standing up to recite the pledge of allegiance or show respect. So that was just normal for me growing up. That was a normal context. Part of everyday life. Christianity and faithfulness to Jesus exists alongside of, and in a context that's celebratory of all things that glorify the United States and the United States being an exceptional place to live.

So by the time I was a teenager, I fully embraced that. I went to a Christian private elementary school where my strongest subject was American history. I was an American history buff, and my favorite teacher was my American history teacher in high school. We didn't learn anything that might shed light on the shadows of American history, if I can put it that way. We were taught the good things, or we were taught the things that were done good as a way of building up the American experience and American identity. But it was only one part of the American experience. It was the part of the American experience that benefited certain people at the expense of other people.

By the time I was a teenager, I had a very rose-colored perspective of our country that we all live in. It was not uncommon for me to find comfort and strength in comparing the United States with the city on a hill metaphor, which is a metaphor Jesus uses for the church in the Gospel of Matthew; he doesn't use it for a nation, or a nation-state. As Mako talked about, it's inherently international and intercultural. But that's not the way I heard those metaphors used growing up. By the time I was a teenager, that was sort of the lifestyle I was engrained in. At the time, my best friend Tom McGuinness, at the time his father was co-piloting an American airlines flight that was hijacked and crashed into the Twin Towers on September 2001, I was ready to crusade against the people who had wounded our country. Full endorsement of an onslaught of military response. I was 14. I couldn't go fight. But I thought that by the time I was 18 or 19, I probably would. Because how dare these people hurt my friend's family and our country. You can look this kid up. His mom has gone on to be an inspirational Christian conference speaker about dealing with the grief and loss of her husband on 9/11. That was a galvanizing event for me.

By the time we got to April of 2003, does anyone remember where they were on April 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2003? It was a Wednesday at least if you lived on the East Coast of the U.S. It became very clear throughout the day if you watched 24 hour cable news, that the U.S. Air Force was going to launch a pre-emptive strike on Baghdad. It was highly suspected that Saddam Hussein and his sons were going to be targets of opportunity. It was also youth group night. I was expected to be at youth group, all night, because it was a Wednesday and that's where I was supposed to be. Back in those days, we had VCR's. You could put a VHS tape into your VCR and program it to start recording at a set time. If your favorite program was on when you were at work, or in the middle of the night while you were sleeping, you could record it and you could watch it later. I did not want to miss the potential for this pre-emptive strike on Iraq. I wanted to see it. I wanted to remember it. I thought it was going to be a watermark moment for our country to get the vengeance on the people that wounded us. But I had to be at youth group. I put my 8 hour VHS tape into my VCR and I programmed that thing to come on about an hour before I suspected I would be home. So if that happened before I got home from youth group, I would be able to go back and relive that moment. There are a few people on this call who know me for a while, so maybe you know this part of my story.

When I think about this idea of Pentecost and nationalism and this concept of Empire, that's where I'm coming from. Those are very defining moments of my personal background and personal story. Hopefully that doesn't characterize how people would identify me today. If you've only known me for a few years, I hope you don't think of me that way. I like to say that Christ is actively at work in me and mostly killed that person.

So what's been interesting is that as I develop new convictions in my late teens and early 20s, I became very bitter and very angry with the people who espouse the culture I grew up with. There was open verbal

conflict and spiritual conflict with church youth group leaders. I meet my parents, pastors, teachers from my high school – people I was very intimate and close with for a very long time – communication exploded and then was ceased, because I felt like I’ve been lied to, or betrayed, or taught dishonest theology. I thought I’d been lied to.

Flash forward to the last couple of years, what’s been very profound for me – not to make excuses or to excuse people for poor theology and poor application of Scripture – is to have people at my home church in NH who I had written off or just assumed that I was never going to have a conversation of substance in my life or haven’t even given a second thought to in a few years – reach out and say, “We’re watching what’s happening on a national level in the wake of the George Floyd killing and the Brianna Taylor killing. We’re home, and we’re inundated with information and inundated with time. And we feel like we’re maybe missing something, and we’d like to get your perspective. Because we know you’re in physical proximity to people who don’t look the way we do. They wouldn’t exactly use those words. It would come out more rough and cringeworthy; but that’s the intent, I think. That’s at least given me a little bit of hope; not a lot, but a little bit. My senior pastor who got a Masters of Divinity from Gordon-Conwell that I think he earned in the 90s, maybe earlier – he’s probably 60 – 65 years old – would have never spoken about politics, culture, race, or anything remotely applicable to be honest from the pulpit the entire time I knew him. There was a 20 year period that I was under his leadership at my home church in NH, he read Ta Nehisi Coates earlier this year and started wrestling with his own racism, late in life. And now he’s trying to lead this evangelical church of people who are racist. They wouldn’t say it, but I’ll say it about them because I’m a product of the culture, and I’m comfortable calling it what it is. He’s leading them into territory to reflect and change. So there’s an opportunity there to speak and hopefully to shed some context who, as recently as a year ago, I would have written off.”

I think what’s been important for me as a young, white, recovering evangelical from a homogenous context is... I tend to make excuses for, or have a lot of patience for people in their development. Meanwhile, a lot of people that I’m close to in my day to day life are in a lot of pain. And that’s the attitude I try to bring to these conversations. There’s an urgency. The evangelical church dismisses it in favor of a concept of process. Sometimes processes need to be hard, and they need to be painful, and they need to be quick, because the stakes are very great, and people’s pain is very real. It’s not a theological exercise. It’s a life and death exercise for a lot of people. And that’s a whole different language that folks in the evangelical church are used to speaking.”

That is very helpful, Ben, and I know it’s fresh, and live, and costly. These days are costly for us in different ways. I’m just going to say a couple more things, and then our sermon will be done.

### **Winning with Jesus or Failing with Moses**

Let me just finish up here. I think what Ben shared illustrates really well why it is either Pentecost or Christian nationalism, especially white Christian nationalism. It’s either-or. I’m going to put it a little differently, and take you more deeply into this passage so we can talk more intelligently about it. And I want to say this: You can’t win with Jesus and fail with Moses at the same time. You can’t win with Jesus and fail with Moses at the same time. These are different points of the story

Remember what I said about Pentecost was the calendar date of the remembering of Mount Sinai when Israel was with Moses. But here, they’re with Jesus. And these are different points of the story. Pentecost is like finally being at the party and realizing, “This is way better than I expected.” Being with Moses at Mount Sinai is like being invited to the party, and turning it down. Here’s why this matters.

White American evangelicals tend to believe that the United States has an origin story like the Israelites under Moses. It goes something like this. We English Puritans were just looking for freedom of religion, freedom of worship. Even though we actually had freedom of worship in the Netherlands but those Dutch threatened our English language and our culture. Plus, a lot of us were broke because we couldn’t find work there. And we didn’t like the youth culture in the city of Leiden. But let’s just focus on the religious freedom question. But also where could we find a lot of cheap land, and maybe even slave labor. Well, we heard about North America. So what do we do? We get on ships. We cross a wide body of water. We come to an abundant land. And then we start to play with the poetry of that. What’s that like? That’s like God bringing Israel out of Egypt so they could worship. They

go through water. They come to an abundant land. And so let's insert ourselves into that story. God gave us this land. Hey, that's at least what John Winthrop told us. Roger Williams told us no, but we eventually kicked him out. And that's why we could eventually kill the Native Americans or enslave them and take their land and not feel bad. And we made a covenant with God. That is why this nation is a "Christian nation."

Now as I've told that, you can tell, there's some problems with that. But let's just focus on the biblical problem, the problem of entering into and co-opting the Old Testament story like that. And I'll repeat this: You can't win with Jesus and fail with Moses at the same time. What does that mean?

Let's understand why Pentecost is the better retelling version of the Sinai event. When God brought Israeli out of Egypt and led them to Mount Sinai, they immediately started failing with Moses. Even Moses failed. He failed himself. So when Old Testament Israel made the covenant with God – called the Sinai covenant – the Sinai covenant trapped them in Groundhog Day. You know the movie, where the same day repeats itself over and over? That was Israel in the Old Testament: failure, repentance, and God's deliverance; failure repentance, and God's deliverance. Repeat, repeat. It's like lather, rinse, repeat, over and over. Why? Because they could never succeed at cleansing their own human nature. They could not circumcise their hearts: Deuteronomy 10:16, where God said this is what you're supposed to do. They're not supposed to be a nation like other nations on their own. They were God's focus group to study the human problem, and only Jesus solved the human problem. Only Jesus broke through the Sinai covenant to get to the other side: full unity with God's Spirit, a heart fully circumcised from sin like something cut away; human nature is healed; Eden is renewed.

That's why Jesus ascended. Not just to the top of a mountain, but to the top of the universe. Notice the difference in the stories? Moses went up to Mount Sinai without the Israelites. Because they were afraid and they stayed at the bottom. They got God's invitation – hey come up here – and they said no. Moses alone was purified by the fire of God on Mount Sinai (Exod 19:17 – 19). And even that was partial because Moses failed (Num 20:8 – 13). But Jesus didn't fail. He lived a totally pure life and went all the way up to the Father. And the fire of God came down on the disciples' heads. It made each person a mini-Mount Sinai. We are one with Jesus because he went up there for us, carrying our humanity in him. And yes, we're down here, but Jesus is one of us, and we win with him if we have his Spirit living in us. That's what Pentecost means. And that's what the Holy Spirit coming down mean.

Here's another contrast. Moses came down the mountain eventually with stone tablets because the Israelites didn't let God write His commandments on their hearts and their human nature. They refused the invitation. They failed with Moses. Jesus came down by his Spirit because he wrote God's commands on his heart and in his human nature, to love the Father. Jesus won. And we win with him because we participate in what he's done for us.

Pentecost is a retelling of Mount Sinai, but with Jesus winning instead of Israel's failure and being locked in cycles of defeat. And I think that is one of the reasons ultimately why the United States, if it does not repent, winds up locked in cycles of defeat to sin. Jesus' win was a win in place of a fail. So just like Jesus' death and resurrection happened on Passover on the date of the deliverance from Egypt, it was God's deliverance from bondage. But Jesus' act was even better than the last. He passed through and escapes the bondage of sin and death. But Pentecost is Mount Sinai but even better. That is why it is either Pentecost or Christian nationalism. But you cannot have both.

You can have Christians in a nation. But there is no such thing as a Christian nation. There is no such thing. We have a call to tell the truth. We have a call to proclaim what Pentecost is – what it means in light of Christ vs. the Empires, including the Empire we live in. I am persuaded that this is every Christian's responsibility in these days. We must confront the fundamental mistakes that this country was founded on.