

	USA Focus Sunday 5 July 2026	St. Catherine's Anglican Chaplaincy Katharinenplatz 5 70182 Stuttgart <i>Anglican Centre</i> Olgastraße 56 70182 Stuttgart
	<i>Rev. Dr. Howard F. Perry</i>	
Readings: Deuteronomy 10:17-21; Hebrews 11:8-16; Matthew 5:43-48		

In the church in which I grew up, North (United) Methodist Church in North, South Carolina, there has been an American flag in the sanctuary as long as I can remember. When I visited last March, it was still there. It usually just stood back in the left corner at one end of the altar. At the other end was a church flag.

However, once when a Boy Scout from the church was working on his God and Country Award, it got more attention. Every Sunday the boy would march into the sanctuary through the door from the Sunday School rooms carrying the flag in front of him. As soon as we saw him, everyone stopped talking and stood up. He stopped in the middle of the front of the sanctuary, turned toward the congregation and lowered the flag at a 45° angle. We all put our hands over our hearts and recited from memory the Pledge of Allegiance¹ which we had all, of course, learned in school. He then raised the flag upright, turned and marched to the stand at the end of the altar, put the flag carefully, almost reverently in the stand, and walked to his place. The organ started the prelude and the service began. This went on for a year.²

Is that a symptom of White Christian Nationalism in the US? Maybe.

I

However, the problem is nothing new.

It all started when the Church grew beyond Palestine. Paul preached to Greek speakers who spoke no Hebrew. A further complication is that the New Testament is written in a dialect of Classical Greek, although Jesus spoke Aramaic, and the Old Testament is written in Hebrew. And not even back then could all theologians read these texts in their original language.

We are accustomed to worshipping in languages we understand well, often our mother tongues. This is one reason we have landed at St. Catherine's; for not all of us are originally Anglican. Worshipping in the language of the people is also a consequence of the Reformation. The liturgy of Luther's time was in Latin, which few understood. To be fair, Latin was for a long time a language most Christians spoke, but as that changed the Catholic church did not. Sermons were sometimes in the local language of the people, but the liturgy was not.

In contrast to the Roman Catholic Church, Orthodox churches have always allowed their churches to celebrate the liturgy in the language of the people. The Orthodox church was also organized by nation and language. That is why we have Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox and so on.

Part of the problem of Christian Nationalism is hermeneutical. We can only understand the Gospel in the languages we know. And for the great majority of Americans and English this language is exclusively English. And we all recognize that it is often difficult to translate a word from one language into another. That is why the German word "Angst" has been adopted in English, for example – and try to translate "Gemütlichkeit" into English! Good luck!

When we use a language to preach the Gospel, we also use concepts, assumptions and ideas embedded in that language in that place. We cannot avoid it. We cannot get behind or beyond the language we use. That is why it is so important that we pay such close attention to the words and expressions we use. They can transport associations and values that we in reality reject. Especially minorities and oppressed groups have thus developed a very good ear for derogatory expressions that the dominant group – in the West Old White Guys like me – often do not recognize as derogatory.

¹ I pledge allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America, and to the Republic for which it stands, one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all. ("[U]nder God" was added in 1954.)

² Interestingly, an official website of the UMC opined in 2013 that there should be no American flag in the sanctuary. See <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/should-we-have-flags-in-the-church-the-christian-flag-and-the-american-flag>; accessed 6/28/2026 5:29 PM.

The reading from Deuteronomy tells us clearly that, despite all of these complications, our devotion, our faith has only one object and one alone. Let me highlight a couple of crucial points in this morning's Lesson from the Hebrew scriptures:

The Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial.... You shall fear the Lord your God; him alone you shall worship; to him you shall hold fast, and by his name you shall swear.

It becomes difficult – and heretical – when we identify our culture, its language and concepts, with faith in God.

In the Gospel Reading, Jesus turbocharges this insight:

Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

As Christians we are called to follow Christ. Everything else, including loyalty to the community of fellow followers, the church, is secondary. Loyalty to any region, country, culture or anything else is even farther down the list.

We need to recognize this conundrum and wrestle with it because we cannot escape it.

II

For Americans this conundrum is especially challenging as we celebrate the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, which was yesterday. This is a document that has become so fundamental to our – to my – identity as an American that the author of a recent book on it gave her book the title *American Scripture*.³ That is no surprise when we hear its almost biblical cadence:

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.

It is against this backdrop, biblical tradition from Genesis through Revelation and the majestic words of the Declaration of Independence, the dragon of White Christian Nationalism raises its ugly head in the US. However, when we criticize White Christian Nationalists for their indifference to the suffering of those seized and interned by ICE or for praising Trump's racism, sexism and cruelty, we must be humble. For this dragon is old.

He reaches back at least to the Revolutionary War. We can hear his roar in the sermons military chaplains and pastors at home held that glorified death and destruction in that sacred cause. I say "sacred" because that is the way they and the great majority of their hearers understood the struggle for independence. The Bible was for them "Sacred Scripture for Sacred War", as a historian puts it.⁴ The reach of the freedoms for which the revolutionaries fought was, however, limited. "In Revolutionary America only white men were created equal," another historian acidly observes.⁵ We hear the dragon's voice again in the runup to the Civil War. Pastors, not only in the South, preached sermons and wrote treatises to defend slavery. Indeed, their Slaveholding Christianity is a direct source of the White Christian Nationalism currently plaguing the US.⁶

There is, however, another tradition of Christian Nationalism in the US that is not White. We hear it when Frederick Douglass thunders "What, to the Slave, Is the Fourth of July?"⁷ in a speech delivered on July 5, 1852. We

³ Pauline Maier, *American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence* (New York: Random House, 1997).

⁴ James P. Byrd, *Sacred Scripture, Sacred War: The Bible and the American Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), see especially his summary in "Epilogue," pp.164-168. The quotation is the heading on page 166.

⁵ Catherine E. Brekus, *Strangers and Pilgrims: Female Preaching in America, 1740-1845* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), p. 71.

⁶ See Eric L. McDaniel, "Poisoned Fruit from a Toxic Tree: Christian Nationalism as the Legacy of Slaveholding Christianity, in *Currents in Theology and Mission* 53:3 (July 2026), 6-20. This is a thematic issue all around "Declaring Independence from Christian Nationalism," title of the number.

⁷ *Frederick Douglass: Speeches & Writings*, ed. David W. Blight (New York: Library of America, 2022), pp. 166-192.

hear it as well when Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. calls out “I Have a Dream”⁸ in front of the Lincoln Memorial on August 28, 1963. In their own ways, Douglass and King were Christian Nationalists. In their jeremiads⁹ they both called out the nation for not living up to its principles – and they meant the biblical principles of justice and love that the Christian majority of their times supposedly confessed as well as the secular principles they saw in the Declaration of Independence.

Inspiring as these speeches are and as useful as they are as counterweights to the dominant White Christian Nationalism, they are not the solution.

III

The solution – or, more modestly, the way to a solution – is to deconstruct our conflation of love for country and culture and the Gospel. Only when we have cut through this Gordian Knot, can we begin to build the House of God anew. We Americans must free ourselves from the seductive illusion with which I and many grew up: To be a good American is to be a good Christian is to be a good American....

To free ourselves from this illusion, we American Christians must, at a minimum, do two things.

First, we American Christians must unleash the scripture and free the Bible from captivity to America¹⁰. For much too long, we have wrapped the Bible in an American flag and read it through red, white and blue glasses. In this time of crisis, we need to unwrap it and throw away the glasses. We need to read it anew and take its words seriously. That means we let those words and stories challenge us. If the Bible does not challenge us, we are misunderstanding it. If it comforts us in our attitudes and perceptions, we are misusing it.

This is easier said than done. As I pointed out at the beginning, understanding what the prophets and Jesus said is inseparable from the language we use to read and understand what they said and did. Once we acknowledge this problem, however, we can begin to distance ourselves from it. One way to do this is to make sure that we read and take seriously how Christians read the Bible and think about it who are not like us. This is not easy and it is frequently unpleasant – but it is effective. I have probably learned the most and gained the most insight into what it means to follow Christ in my encounters with feminist theology and Black theology, for example.

Everyone’s journey will be different. Here at St. Catherine’s, for example, there are not many Old White American Men. However, we all have deeply trodden paths of understanding that we need to leave. Not everyone needs to make the great journey that I have.

Second, we American Christians need to de-baptize America¹¹ and give it back to the world. For the state is not the church and the church is not the state. Here I mean my fellow “mainline Protestants.”¹² We are not as numerous as we have been and we do not have the influence we had through so much of the 20th century. However, we have prepared the ground for the right-wing, Trumpian Evangelicals. They are only doing what we have taught them. In our prayers, in our preaching, in so much of what we have done we have been their teachers. The White Christian Nationalism we – I – so oppose is simply the flipside of what we mainstream Protestants have done for so long.

⁸ Martin Luther King, Jr., *I Have A Dream: Writings and Speeches That Challenged the World*, ed. James M. Washington (New York: HarperCollins, 1986), pp. 101-107.

⁹ A jeremiad is a political sermon, a literary genre the Puritans brought with them, but transformed. The jeremiad was a lament over the sins of the people, their corrupt ways, and warned of God’s wrath. The Puritans, however, turned it around. Out of a message of vengeance they made a promise of success in the new world. In the course of time this message moved into the political realm and lost the Puritans’ theological emphasis. The jeremiad, now a form of political speech, retained, however, the Puritans’ structure. It criticized the present, referenced and drew on a noble past and promised a glorious future if the people would truly live out the values of the Founding Fathers. Here I am drawing on Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad*, 2nd edition (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989).

¹⁰ I have borrowed this expression from Stanley Hauerwas, *Unleashing the Scripture: Freeing the Bible from Captivity to America*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993). A brilliant, provocative collection of essays and sermons.

¹¹ I have borrowed this expression from Brian Kaylor and Beau Underwood, *Baptizing America: How Mainline Protestants Helped Build Christian Nationalism* (Des Peres: Chalice Press, 2024). Their argument has strongly influenced this sermon.

¹² “Mainline churches” usually refers to the so-called “Seven Sisters”: American Baptist Churches USA, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Episcopal Church, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), United Church of Christ, and United Methodist Church. For a more detailed discussion see *Baptizing America*, pp. 8-12.

As Christians, we are called to be good citizens. That is simply part of loving my neighbor. And part of being a good citizen can be deciding to go into politics and get elected to an office that helps me to love my neighbors more effectively. I think it is good and important that people of faith go into politics. However, when we begin to identify our faith and our government as two sides of the same coin, we have a serious theological problem: it's called idolatry.

Ultimately, when we de-baptize America and give it back to the world, we strengthen the church. When we survey church history, the periods of decadence in the church were predominately periods in which the church had or pursued political influence or secular power. Let the church be the church again. Give America, give the state back to the world.

I am preaching on America Sunday and I am preaching from my gut. Nonetheless, I hope and pray that my thoughts make sense for the rest of you. The rest of you today who are not Americans as I am must transfer this to your own situation!

The task is challenging, but I have hope. For I see in our reading of scripture and of the Declaration of Independence growth in understanding. I see growth in drawing out the consequences of what is in the texts. I see a slow, but sure deconstruction of blinders that have restricted our vision. I see the recognition – and destruction – of the racist, sexist, classist, nationalist glasses that filtered out parts of our common history. I see the overcoming of prejudices of all kinds. We have a long way to go and we have backslid and failed again and again, but we have made a serious, conscientious start and are making progress on this journey of faith.

Would the problem of White Christian Nationalism be solved when North, now no long United, just Methodist Church would remove the flag? No. Of course, not. But it could be a start.

We must start in our hearts. We must examine, carefully, prayerfully, mercilessly honestly, where our loyalties lie and what our priorities truly are. What truly comes first for us? I cannot take on that task for anyone but myself. I can only point out some things and encourage you on your own journey.

My hope and my prayer is that at the end of our examination we can truly and sincerely join with Joshua and confess *as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord* (Joshua 24:15).

Amen!