

# **Voices: Resist Christian nationalism displayed during assault on U.S. Capitol**

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The acts of domestic terror at the U.S. Capitol during the certification of the Electoral College vote on Jan. 6 is a tragic, dark stain on our nation's history and an attack on our democracy.

Former President George W. Bush [expressed](#) his “dismay” and “disbelief” at the insurrectionists invading the Capitol, writing: “It is a sickening and heartbreaking sight. ... I am appalled by the reckless behavior of some political leaders since the election and by the lack of respect shown today for our institutions, our traditions, and our law enforcement. The violent assault on the Capitol—and disruption of a Constitutionally-mandated meeting of Congress—was undertaken by people whose passions have been inflamed by falsehoods and false hopes.”

## **A break from past election disputes**

Obviously, we have faced rebellion and unrest before as a nation. And we've certainly lacked effective leadership during trying times. See President Franklin Pierce (1853-1857) and President James Buchanan (1857-1861) who were completely ineffective prior to the Civil War. As dreadful as they were, they did not advocate for civil unrest.

However, today's witnessed insurrection was primed by the sitting president and certain prominent congressional leaders who relentlessly shared false narratives concerning the 2020 election.

For weeks, the legitimacy of the presidential election has been attacked by the president, numerous congressional leaders, conservative cable networks and talk radio. As these allegations passed through social media, Trump supporters believed the election was stolen, even though all 50 states, numerous courts—including the Supreme Court—and even former Attorney General Barr debunked the allegations, defended the accuracy of the election, and even performed numerous recounts as further verification to the election’s accuracy.

But for those who believed the falsehoods, the narrative became set in stone. According to a [recent NPR poll](#), only 24 percent of Republicans believe the election is accurate, compared to 95 percent of Democrats and 67 percent of Independents.

On Jan. 6, these beliefs spilled over into chaotic madness as a mob descended upon the Capitol, smashing windows, tearing through offices, disrupting sessions of Congress and leading to four reported deaths. Numerous flags were paraded through the Capitol, including the Confederate flag, Trump flags of various sorts and even a flag declaring, “Jesus Saves,” which indicates the close intertwining of politics and faith.

## **Marriage of church and state**

Traditionally, Baptists favored separation of church and state in order to protect the church, state and individual. Randall Balmer, in *Blessed Assurance: A History of Evangelicalism in America*, wrote the following: “[Separation of church and state] has lent political stability by diverting social discontent into the religious sphere, and it has ensured religious vitality by guaranteeing untrammelled expression in the free marketplace of American religion.”

However, as Christianity gained influence in the latter half of the 20th century, American Christians fell hard for the temptation of temporal

political power, leading James E. Wood Jr., a prominent church-state scholar, to [write](#): “The rising tide of American nationalism, which seeks to express itself in terms of religious faith, would make religion in America a culture religion or tribal faith. To be a good American and to be a good Christian are not one and the same and can never be. ... To put it another way, God cannot be made an adjunct to American nationalism.”

Due to Christian nationalism, a stronger union of church and state has led to increased political instability. Politics and religion have increasingly aligned for Christians in America, leading to the belief that to be a good Christian one must vote for a certain party. Or that certain politicians are God’s chosen instruments. However, this conflating of religion and politics comes with a heavy price.

One of the dangers of a society determining a leader is divinely chosen—whether viewed as King David or King Cyrus—is that the standard of righteousness morphs to become whatever that “chosen” leader determines it to be.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer faced this in Germany prior to World War II as he lamented the church’s coziness with the state. Bonhoeffer biographer Charles Marsh [quotes him](#): “We are about to witness a great reorganization of the churches. ... The most intelligent people have totally lost both their heads and their Bible.”

The same could be argued concerning Christian nationalism in America and the increased tribalism and partisanship within American politics and culture.

## **Resisting Christian nationalism**

While some have embraced Christian nationalism, other religious leaders are sounding the alarm. Jemar Tisby, concerning the events at the Capitol,

[tweeted](#), “Don’t miss the religious elements of what’s happening at the Capitol. ... What they’re showing us is that Christian Nationalism is and has been the biggest threat not only to Christianity in the US but to democracy as well.”

James Wood warned similarly 50 years ago: “The very mixing of allegiance to God with patriotism, so characteristic of many of the militant organized movements today crusading under the banner of Americanism, is a dangerous threat to both freedom of the state and the freedom of the church—the free society and the Christian Church.”

What are we to do? We as Christians must reflect, repent and lead in a new direction away from Christian nationalism, which leads to further injustice and instability. We can and must remain involved in politics as salt and light, but we must not find our identities in a political tribe. We must not swear allegiance to a politician.

May the tragic events that unfolded this week in Washington, D.C., be a wake-up call for us as Christians to loosen our grip on the temptation of temporal power and tribal belonging and to recommit ourselves to serving God by doing justly, loving mercy and walking humbly with our God.

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