

## Theme: The Kingdom of God vs Empire

Readings: Luke 9:51-62, Luke 4: 1-13

One of the things I really love doing is researching the history behind popular songs. In 1993, the punk rock Bad Religion released their single American Jesus from their album Recipes for Hate. Now with a name like “Bad Religion” you may be wondering what relevance they have and why I’m using them to make a point. Plus a punk rock band? Surely they’re a bunch of jobs that just want to offend decent Christian folk with their loud music! But I want to read you some of the lyrics from the song.

*“I don't need to be a global citizen  
Because I'm blessed by nationality  
I'm a member of a growing populace  
We enforce our popularity  
There are things that seem to pull us under  
And there are things that drag us down  
But there's a power and a vital presence  
That's lurking all around*

*We've got the American Jesus  
See him on the interstate  
We've got the American Jesus  
He helped build the president's estate*

*...  
He's the farmers barren fields  
The force the army wields  
The expression in the faces of the starving millions  
The power of the man he's the fuel that drives the clan  
He's the motive and conscience of the murderer  
He's the preacher on t.v., the false sincerity  
The form letter that's written by the big computers  
The nuclear bombs and the kids with no moms  
And I'm fearful that he's inside me”*

Far from being an irreverent anthem, American Jesus is a stinging critique on the co-opting of Jesus by the American empire. Greg Graffin (ph.d.) would later clarify that “We're not against people going to church on Sunday! Religion encompasses a lot of things -- like people thinking the States is the greatest, or that white people should dominate the globe. Our song 'American Jesus' is about the supposition that Jesus treats America differently than other countries. During the Gulf War, George Bush said, 'We'll win, because God is on our side!'. What an amazing statement!”<sup>1</sup>

Right, so some of you are probably figuring out where this sermon is going and that it’s going to be one that will probably step on a few toes. Afterall, religion and politics are two topics you don’t discuss in polite company because they are such polarising topics. But the relationship of religion and politics is a hot button topic. Should we have a Christian government? Or should we have strong separation of church and state? How much should

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<sup>1</sup> “Hate Core! (Kerrang Interview with Bad Religion),” The Bad Religion Page, accessed June 27, 2019, <http://www.thebrpage.net/media/item.asp?itemID=500>.

our religion affect our politics? How much should our politics affect our religion? And who gets to decide what a Christian government looks like? I recently posted on my Facebook account "I feel the same way about Christian political parties as I do about "family values" parties: they rarely represent my Christian values/family values." And it turns out I wasn't alone in feeling this way. In fact in the lead up to the 2014 national elections I remember reading two different voting guides for Christian voting with each one advocating for polar opposite parties. And this question is especially relevant now with the recent formation of the Destiny Church Coalition Party and the rumours that MP Alfred Ngaro was going to split from National to form a Christian party. Some people expressed concern, perhaps spurred by memories of Tamaki prophesying in 2004 that his church would rule New Zealand, including its wealth, politics, and social order, by 2008.<sup>2</sup> Others felt it was time that we have a strong Christian political party again after what many felt had been a death blow to Christian politics in New Zealand in the form of the 2005 Graham Capill sex scandal. But again, who gets to decide what Christian politics is?

So today I'm not going to tell you what political party or political system should support, despite have strong political views myself. Rather, I want to present a framework for how to think about the relationship of the Kingdom of God to worldly politics, a concept I will herein refer to as empire.

And empire was a concept Jesus was very familiar with. Like other Jews of the time, Jesus lived under the rule of the Roman Empire. And the Jews weren't too happy about living under the occupation of a foreign empire. The defining question of the day was how do we take the land of Israel back for God? If you were a Pharisee you believed that God will give the land back as a reward for piety, and so you enforced religious rules upon your fellow Jews to avoid the appearance of sin. If you were a Sadducee you believed that you may as well make the best of a bad situation and cooperate with the Romans in exchange for special treatment. If you were an Essene you agreed with the Pharisees but you went a step further and believed that you had to segregate yourself from all worldly influences and that meant compounds in the desert. And finally, if you were a Zealot you believed in good old fashioned political violence. And Jesus is dropped straight into this political milieu. Many of the Jews were expecting God to send a warlike king to come to rescue them and even the disciples kept trying to conform Jesus into this political messiah who would restore the nation of Israel. But Jesus, in his usual fashion, refused to be conformed into human expectations. Instead of restoring Israel to nationhood he taught that his Kingdom was one that was a spiritual one where the entire social order was turned upside down. Now the ways in which Jesus taught and demonstrated this are woven throughout the gospels and time does not permit a comprehensive list. But one prominent example is Jesus humbling himself and washing the feet of his disciples. In the Luke 9 passage we see Jesus' disciples asking God if they should call down fire from the sky to destroy a Samaritan village that would not welcome Jesus. After all, any other king would have the inhabitants slaughtered for such insolence. But Jesus rebukes his disciples. Worldly kings had multiple palaces. I've actually visited the site of one of King Herod's summer palaces situated at Caesarea and it would have been spectacular in its day. Jesus, in contrast, had no place to rest his head. Even the

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<sup>2</sup> TVNZ, "Is Destiny Destined to Rule?" TVNZ, October 3, 2004, [http://tvnz.co.nz/view/news\\_national\\_story\\_skin/451171?format=html](http://tvnz.co.nz/view/news_national_story_skin/451171?format=html).

foxes and birds were better off than Jesus! What we see in Jesus is a king who doesn't see power as coming from dominating others but coming from serving others.

For this sermon I've drawn heavily on Greg Boyd's excellent book *The Myth of a Christian Nation: How The Quest For Political Power is Destroying the Church*. And he provides a helpful summary of the distinction between the Kingdom of God and the empire.<sup>3</sup>

Kingdom of the World (Empire)	Kingdom of God
"Power over"	"Power under"
Trusts in the power of the sword	Trusts in the power of the cross
Focuses on controlling others behaviour	Focuses on transforming from the inside out
Preserves and advances one's own self-interests and will	Submits to God's will
Tribal	Universal
Advances own people group/national/ethnicity/religion/ideology/political agendas	Is centered on loving all people as God loves them
Operates by tit-for-tat, eye for an eye justice	Operates by returning good for evil, turning the other cheek
Fights enemies of blood and flesh	Is "against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (Eph 6:12)

But what happens when these two kingdoms mix?

The early church was known for its radical witness and commitment to sharing the love of Christ with its enemies. But in 312AD everything changed. On the evening of 27th October, the Roman leader Constantine was preparing to go to war against his main political rival Maximinus when he supposedly had a vision while looking at the sun, or a dream depending on which historical version you believe. In this vision/dream he saw a glowing cross with the words "by this sign you shall conquer". According to legend, Constantine ordered his soldiers to paint this sign on their shields. For the first time, Christianity was associated with military conquest. He then defeated Maximinus' forces and would declare himself Emperor of the Western Roman Empire in 313AD. One of his first acts was to legalise Christianity and to somewhat convert to the religion. Christianity was finally enjoying mainstream appeal and political power. From this point on, the line between church and government became very

<sup>3</sup> I made this chart as a summary of pages 46-48 of Boyd, Gregory A.. *The Myth of a Christian Nation* (p. 46-48). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

blurry. Fast forward to the fifth century when the theologian Augustine formulated an argument that the Church/government could use the sword against heretics if it meant that there was a chance that earthly pain could save their soul. And from there we have a long history of Christians butchering entire communities of people in the hopes of saving their souls from heresy. But the forces of empire would turn its interests elsewhere eventually. In his book “Faith in the Face of Empire”, the theologian Mitri Raheb writes of his experience living under Western military occupation. He uses the analogy of the government providing the equipment to carry out a military occupation while the Church provides a theological justification or a “halo” to justify the occupation.<sup>4</sup> He writes

*“Empires can’t survive by their military, political, and economic power and might alone. Rather, the justification of the empire has to be based on a higher logic; the violation of human rights needs to have something akin to divine purpose and to be set within an ideological and theological framework. This was true for the Roman Empire, which believed it was destined to bring world peace through dominion. It was true of the Byzantine Empire, which, with the ecumenical creed, tried to glue its territories and identities together. It was true for the Crusaders, who believed they were present to cleanse the Holy Land from the infidels. It was also the raison d’être for the Muslim Empire, which believed it was bringing the world out of the age of ignorance (jahiliyah). In modern colonial history, in a similar vein, empires justified their expansion and subordination of other lands and peoples under the cover of bringing civilization, enlightenment, and progress to people living in darkness and backwardness.”<sup>5</sup>*

Some of you may remember in a recent sermon I spoke on the history of white supremacy and the church, and I mentioned the term “Manifest Destiny”. Manifest Destiny was a 19th century American idea that stated that God had given the white American colonists the land and a divine destiny to subjugate and reform the lands of America into a light for the world to achieve the salvation of humankind. Also, goldmines. One problem: there were already people living there. Solution: remove them. This came to its pinnacle in the Trail of Tears. In the early 19th century gold was discovered in Cherokee territory in Georgia and many of the farmers wanted more land to set up cotton plantations. So the American government settled on a plan: forcibly remove the Cherokee from their land and relocate them to “Indian Country” in Tennessee. After all, all Native Americans are essentially the same and surely the tribes already on the land will take care of the Cherokee. And it’s not like the Cherokee are using the land in the way God intended. We’ll take the resources they’re just ignoring and turn the land into abundant farming land as God intended us to use the land! And so the military rounded up around 13,000 Cherokee men, women, and children and forced them to march to their new home. Over the three month march, at least 4,000 of those would die from disease, starvation, and exposure to the winter cold.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Raheb, Mitri. Faith in the Face of Empire: The Bible through Palestinian Eyes. (location 442) Orbis Books. Kindle Edition.

<sup>5</sup> Raheb, Mitri. Faith in the Face of Empire: The Bible through Palestinian Eyes. (location 1057-1058) Orbis Books. Kindle Edition.

<sup>6</sup> For more information on the history of the Trail of Tears, I recommend the How Stuff Works Podcast’s episodes “History of the Trail of Tears, Part 1” (Mar 7, 2017), and “Part 2” (Mar 9, 2017). For more on settler-colonial narratives and justifications I recommend Citations Needed Podcast’s

How could this happen? How could God's name be used to justify this atrocity?

Let's go back to Luke 4:1-13 - The Temptation of Christ. This passage is often used to demonstrate how Jesus was sinless despite being tempted by the devil. But there's something interesting in there. The devil takes Jesus to a high point and shows him all the kingdoms of the world. And he says "I will give you all their authority and splendor; it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to. If you worship me, it will all be yours." To which Jesus replies, "It is written: 'Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.'

Now, notice that Jesus doesn't challenge the devil's claim to ownership. Jesus doesn't deny that the devil has authority over the kingdoms of the world. In *The Myth of a Christian Nation: How The Quest For Political Power is Destroying the Church*, Greg Boyd comments on this passage and writes:

"No earthly kingdom, however good, is exempt from the scriptural teaching that it is part of "Babylon," a worldwide kingdom ruled by Satan... Minimally, this recognition implies that we can never assume that any particular nation—including our own—is always, or even usually, aligned with God."<sup>7</sup>

Now here's the thing, Christians are allowed to have political sympathies and views. But we must remember that our first loyalty is to the Kingdom of God. We must remember that whatever government we think is best, whether it be, National, Labour, conservative, liberal, capitalist, socialist, New Zealand, American, Israeli, British, Western, Eastern, none of these governments are aligned with God because they operate primarily in the world of self-interest and the dynamics of power over. And when Christians trade in their prophetic witness for political power, when we allow our faith to be used in service of the empire, we are in big trouble.

On January 23rd, 2016 in the middle of a tense battle with Ted Cruz for the evangelical vote, Trump gave a speech in which he said, *"We have to strengthen. Because we are getting — if you look, it's death by a million cuts — we are getting less and less and less powerful in terms of a religion, and in terms of a force... I'll tell you one thing: I get elected president, we'll going to be saying 'merry Christmas' again. Just remember that. And by the way, Christianity will have power, without having to form. Because if I'm there, you're going to have plenty of power. You don't need anybody else. You're going to have somebody representing you very, very well. Remember that."*

And many people were shocked when Christians, albeit mainly white Christians, embraced a man whose lifestyle was a mockery of the values Christians had previously championed for decades. But Trump promised them the power they wanted to win the culture wars evangelicals had been fighting for decades. And culture wars are about using power-over approaches to establish cultural Christianity as the dominant force in society to "take back the nation for God". Yet curiously, Jesus wasn't concerned about taking back Israel for God. Even when it was expected of him by his disciples, Jesus was more concerned about

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"Episode 62: Sanitizing Our Settler-Colonial Past With 'Nation of Immigrants' Narratives" (Jan 16, 2019)

<sup>7</sup> Boyd, Gregory A.. *The Myth of a Christian Nation* (p. 22). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

teaching about the Kingdom of God that transcends nations and their games of power and greed.

I've talked a lot about American evangelical culture because it is the most crude form of Christendom. But we have culture wars here in New Zealand. Consider the furor over the government removing references to the Queen and Jesus in the parliamentary prayer. To be honest, I didn't really have a problem with the removal of references to the Queen (after all, the Royal family is just the Kardashians for people who think they're too sophisticated for the Kardashians). But, and here's my controversial opinion for this sermon, I'm not so sure removing references to Jesus was the grave attack we thought it was. After all, if the references to Jesus were so easily removed from the parliamentary prayer, how meaningful and sincere was it in the first place? Was it just something that was done because it was a nice thing to do before moving into the world of power and control? Soren Kierkegaard was an influential 19th century Danish philosopher and theologian. Originally he had planned to become a pastor in the Danish State Church but became disillusioned when he looked around and saw how entrenched in the world of power the church was. Many people were members of the Church because it was what you did in society, or because it allowed businessmen to secure the confidence and business of the congregations. Kierkegaard wondered how much - or rather - how little the Danish State Church would change if it could be proven Jesus never existed. He would eventually write that the worst apostasy that could happen to Christianity was for it to become simply the religious dimension of the culture.<sup>8</sup>

I think the reason Jesus didn't seem too interested in taking back Israel for God was that he knew that to do it in the way he was expected to meant using the same coercive power tactics the Roman Empire and the religious hypocrites used. Instead, Jesus spent his time with the lowest of society - the tax collectors, the prostitutes, the lepers, the outcasts, and focused on showing them the transforming power of the love of God and his Kingdom in which the first are last and the last are first.

So does this mean that are to abstain from politics? I have a very thoughtful Christian brother in the States who does not participate in elections because of his convictions of what it means to be a radical citizen of the Kingdom of God. But I don't think we are all called to go that far. Rather, when we partake in any political action - and remember that politics permeates our society in a myriad of subtle ways - we need to be asking ourselves if we are taking a power-over or a power-under approach. Are we seeking to control or transform? Are we seeking to shore up the powerful or protect the vulnerable? Most importantly, are we acting out of fear of losing power and influence or are we acting out of love for our fellow people?

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<sup>8</sup> As cited in Boyd, Gregory A.. The Myth of a Christian Nation (p. 115). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.