



The Rise of Right-Wing Wokeism

A Review of Stephen Wolfe's
The Case for Christian Nationalism

BY KEVIN DEYOUNG

I first encountered Stephen Wolfe, through his writing, when I was doing my doctoral work. We were both working on similar intellectual themes and looking at similar sources. I quoted Wolfe—who has a PhD from Louisiana State University and is now a “country scholar at Wolfeshire”—once or twice in my dissertation. Since then, I’ve read an article here or there from Wolfe and have tracked with some of his comments on Twitter. When I saw that he had a massive book coming out making *The Case for Christian Nationalism*, I was eager to read a serious exploration of such a timely and controversial topic.

This is a long review, so let me state my conclusion up front: I understand and sympathize with the desire for something like Christian Nationalism, but if this book represents the best of that *ism*, then Christian Nationalism isn’t the answer the church or our nation needs. For all the fine retrieval work Wolfe does in parts of the book, the overall project must be rejected.

The message—that ethnicities shouldn’t mix, that heretics can be killed, that violent revolution is already justified, and that what our nation needs is a charismatic Caesar-like leader to raise our consciousness and galvanize the will of the people—may bear resemblance to certain blood-and-soil nationalisms of the 19th and 20th centuries, but it’s not a nationalism that honors and represents the name of Christ.

Decline and Retreat

Let me start by acknowledging the understandable desire for something like Christian Nationalism. The best part of the book is Wolfe’s chapter on “The Good of Cultural Christianity” and, in particular, the section on “Celebrating Decline.” Wolfe is right to maintain that while cultural Christianity cannot save sinners (i.e., the message of the gospel is entrusted to the church, not to the civil order), a Christian culture can be both preparative and persuasive in direction of the gospel (213). Just because hypocrisy and nominalism are dangers—dangers that ministers should and do warn against—that doesn’t mean we should welcome the collapse of social assumptions and stigmas that pushed people in the direction of biblical truth and basic morality.

Too many Christians are quick to wish away cultural Christianity without considering the alternatives. “But wouldn’t you prefer to live in a community,” Wolfe asks, “where you can trust your neighbors, having mutual expectations of conduct, speech, and beliefs according to Christian standards? Wouldn’t you prefer to have neighbors with Christian standards of decency, respect, and admonishment, *even if* it is merely cultural?” (223).

These are good questions. I share Wolfe’s bewilderment over the Christian leaders who seem to *prefer* a society hostile to Christianity. I’ve seen pastors in my own denomination look wistfully at Christians losing power and becoming a minority in the country, as if Constantine ruined everything and our influence would be so much greater if we only we could lose power and become more marginalized.

It’s one thing to acknowledge that cultural Christianity comes with tradeoffs, or to recognize that cultural Christianity allowed for certain sins to flourish; it’s another thing to say “good riddance” to Bible Belt near-Christianity, as Russell Moore did in a 2015 article that Wolfe quotes at length (224–25). Wolfe notes how Moore rejoices that “we don’t have Mayberry anymore, if we ever did” (226). Traditional family values may have kept some children in intact families, “But,” Moore concludes, “that’s hardly revival” (225). True, not revival, but something worth preserving, if we can?

“I understand and sympathize with the desire for something like Christian Nationalism, but if this book represents the best of that *ism*, then Christian Nationalism is not the answer the church or our nation needs.”

I’ve given a mini-speech in private settings probably a dozen times in the past five years. I’ve said something like this to my friends and colleagues: “We have to realize that people are scared and discouraged. They see America rapidly becoming less and less Christian. They see traditional morality—especially in areas of sex and gender—not only being tossed overboard but resolutely and legally opposed. Of course, we should not give way to ungodly fear and panic. We should not make an idol out of politics. We should not fight like jerks because that’s the way the world fights. But people want to

see that their Christian leaders—pastors, thinkers, writers, institutional heads—are willing to fight for the truth. You may think your people spend too much time watching Tucker Carlson, or retweeting Ben Shapiro, or looking for Jordan Peterson videos on YouTube, or reading the latest stuff from Doug Wilson—and I have theological disagreements with all of them (after all, some of them aren’t even Christians)—but people are drawn to them because they offer a confident assertion of truth. Our people can see the world being overrun by moral chaos, and they want help in mounting a courageous resistance; instead, they are getting a respectable retreat.”

The online “winsomeness” debate of 2022 was a reprise of the “empathy” debate of 2021. In both instances, someone raises the point, “Hey, that word should not represent the sum-total of our Christian witness. In fact, by itself, that word may smuggle in some bad ideas and assumptions.” A number of voices chime in in agreement.

In response, other Christians say, “Woah, wait a minute. Jesus was full of compassion. We should be kind to one another and love our neighbors. Why are you anti-Jesus?” Which prompts the first group to say, “That’s not really what we were talking about.” Meanwhile, another group runs with the idea that “winsomeness” and “empathy” are bad and concludes that if you don’t assert yourself with maximum obnoxiousness and offensiveness, then you are a Big Eva Squish. Lather, rinse, repeat. The conversation devolves into the usual taking of sides.

As frustrating as those discussions can be, they highlight an important difference in evangelical sensibilities. I’ve used the word “winsome” for years. It’s a good word. One of the unofficial slogans of Reformed Theological Seminary, where I gladly serve, is “winsomely Reformed.” If “winsome” means we engage in the battle of ideas with respect and civility, looking to build bridges where we can, then it’s certainly a worthwhile goal. The problem is when “winsomeness” and “empathy” get to be defined not by our words and deeds but by how our words and deeds make people feel. “I will be kind” is Christianity. “I will not do anything to jeopardize your good opinion of me” is capitulation.

The other problem is that winsomeness almost always runs in one direction. The “winsome” folks are careful to speak respectfully and humbly to an LGBT+ audience, while they’re eager to speak “prophetically” to the MAGA crowd. Many conservative Christians are tired of always being on the defensive and always having to communicate their convictions in ways that left-leaning secularists approve of. They want more than a tiny island of religious freedom where we promise not to bother anyone; they want a vigorous defense of what’s true.

The appeal of something like Christian Nationalism is that it presents a muscular alternative to surrender and defeat. Few conservative Christians have anything like a sophisticated political philosophy. But they know gay so-called marriage is wrong and drag queen story hour is bad. So if the two choices in political philosophy are (1) supporting gay “marriage” because that’s what pluralism demands and defending drag queen story hour as a blessing of liberty or (2) Christian Nationalism, millions of Christians in this country are going to choose the latter. I imagine the same basic equation explains the newfound interest in Catholic integralism as well.

I sympathize with the reasons many Christians want something like Christian Nationalism. They aren’t necessarily looking for culture warriors. They just don’t want to be told that the increasing hostility toward Christian ethics is all a figment of their imagination or really their own fault. These Christians are looking for leadership. They’re looking for confidence. They’re looking for a way to assert not only that Christian ideas have the right to exist but that Christian ideas are *right*. When

a 475-page book with hundreds of footnotes from people like Althusius and Turretin reaches the top 100 on Amazon, you know something deeper is going on than a passion for political theory. Many Christians want an alternative to decline and retreat. So do I. But Christian Nationalism is not the answer.

Difficult Task

I'm going to get to my critique, but first let me make some preliminary remarks about what makes this book difficult to review.

For starters, it's a long book, covering a lot of ground—from philosophy to history to theology to political theory. Wolfe has a lot to say, and there's a lot that can be said in response. But a book review is not a book, so the reviewer has to practice restraint. If you want a fuller summary and more comprehensive evaluation of the book, I recommend [Neil Shenvi's four-part review](#).

Second, this is a personal book. Although there are plenty of footnotes and evidence of academic research, this volume is not meant to be a dispassionate scholarly reflection on the nature of civil society. As Wolfe says in the last paragraph on the last page, “This book is not an intellectual exercise, nor intended simply to ‘contribute to the field’ of Christian political theory. It is personal. It is a vision of the future, and my family is a part of that future” (478).

With that aim, it's hard to know whether the book should be reviewed as a work of political theorizing, as a work of historical retrieval, or as a personal manifesto. Wolfe isn't just arguing for the establishment principle or for legislating both tables of the Mosaic law, he's justifying violent revolution (324) and calling for “the Great Renewal” (435). It would be a mistake to think Wolfe's interest is in settling antiquarian debates.

Third, reviewing *The Case for Christian Nationalism* is difficult because Wolfe stacks the rhetorical deck against critical engagement with his claims and his ideas. At the beginning of the book, Wolfe emphasizes his commitment to use “an older style” of writing that relies on actual arguments, logical coherence, and scholarly demonstration. He laments the fact that so many Christians “resort to rhetorical devices, tweetable shibboleths, and credibility development to assert disparate principles and applications” (19–20). He decries those who “personally attack those who would disagree” and “appeal to common prejudice or sentiment” (20).

And yet, Wolfe doesn't abide by these same ideals in dealing with those who would disagree with his ideas. He speaks of his opponents as “regime evangelicals” (341)

and describes them “as rhetorically enslaved to the sentiments of a coastal elite” (456). Likewise, he anticipates that “the most vociferous critics [of his pro-Russian views] will be GAE [Globalist American Empire]-affirming Christians” (445).

Just as the left has predetermined that any opposition to its ideology must be attributable to racism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia, so some voices on the right have predetermined that anyone unwilling to go all the way in the direction of Christian Nationalism must be sellouts eager to please a nefarious cabal of secular elites. This posture hardly encourages an open and honest exchange of ideas.

These difficulties notwithstanding, I want to offer a substantive critique of *The Case for Christian Nationalism*. I’ll group my concerns under four headings: nations and ethnicity, the nature of the church, Protestant political thought, and the way forward.

1. Nations and Ethnicity

By Wolfe’s own admission, his definitions are often idiosyncratic, and by my estimation, they’re not entirely consistent. For example, the all-important concept of “nation” sometimes operates in Wolfe’s thinking more organically like an ethnicity, sometimes more loosely like a culture, sometimes more locally like a love of people and place, and sometimes more traditionally like a nation-state with a recognizable set of laws, a governing magistrate, and the power of the sword. The front cover contains a picture of America with a cross in the middle, so the book would seem to be about the nation-state we know as the United States of America. But at other times, it’s clear Wolfe doesn’t like that idea of “nation” and is animated by a different understanding of nation—one that defines “nationalism” as the natural good of becoming conscious of your own “people-group,” being for your own people-group, and keeping your people-group distinct from other people-groups (135).

There are many problems with Wolfe’s defense of this “similarity principle.” It’s built upon a weak and speculative foundation about how people would have formed distinct nations even without the fall, it gives too much credence to our own fallen inclinations, and it gives too little consideration for how our desire for “similarity” has been tainted by sin. Grace may perfect nature, but it often does so in ways that feel unnatural to us.

Likewise, Wolfe’s argument doesn’t reckon with the way the Bible relativizes our sense of family (Mark 3:31–35), tears down dividing walls between people groups (Eph. 2:11–22), and presents a multitribal and multilingual reality (and hoped-for future) as a heavenly good (Rev. 5:9–10).

I also fail to see how Wolfe’s rejection of the West’s universalizing tendency squares with Wolfe’s use of natural theology and natural law (which are, by definition, uni-

versally accessible, leading to truths than can be universally affirmed). Shenvi's review is particularly good on the issue of ethnicity, so I won't repeat all the same arguments here.

But before moving on from this point, it's worth mentioning how Wolfe leaves a number of serious questions unanswered. Wolfe often decries the mental habit, forced upon us by secular elites, that makes Christian nationalists feel the need to prove they're not racists or kinists or xenophobes. Wolfe refuses to play by those rules (456–57). I understand the frustration. But surely in a 500-page book, it wouldn't have been misplaced, or kowtowing to the spirit of the age, for Wolfe to make clear exactly what he is and isn't arguing for (especially when he quotes approvingly from Samuel Francis on VDARE.com).

Wolfe says a mark of nationalism is that “each people group has a right to be *for itself*” (118), and that “no nation (properly conceived) is composed of two or more ethnicities” (135), and that our “instinct to conduct everyday life among similar people is natural, and being natural, it is for your good” (142), and that “to exclude an out-group is to recognize a universal good for man” (145), and that “spiritual unity is inadequate for formal ecclesial unity” (200), and that “the most suitable condition for a group of people to successfully pursue the complete good is one of cultural similarity” (201).

“By God’s grace, America has made great strides in overcoming racism in the past 60 years. I fail to see how Wolfe’s vision isn’t a giant step in the wrong direction.”

What are we to do with these statements? Is Wolfe's main concern about immigration policy for a nation-state? That's part of what animates his warning against self-immolation and national suicide (171). Is

he making the argument that we need not be ashamed to love our family, our country, and our place more than other families, countries, and places? That's also part of his concern; fair enough.

But you don't have to be a left-wing watchdog to wonder how these “similarity” arguments work out in practice. In a footnote, Wolfe rejects modern racialist principles and denies that he's making a “white nationalist” argument (119), but if we cannot accept the creedal nation concept, and if ethnicities are grouped by cultural similarity, it's an open question how much cooperation and togetherness blacks and whites (not to mention Asians and Hispanics and Native Americans) will ever share—or if they should even try to live and worship together.

Is this really the direction we're to be pushed by the gospel? Are we really to pursue a social ordering on earth so different from that which is present in heaven? Are we

really so sure that our love for people like us and our ostracism of people unlike us are God-given inclinations and not fallen ones?

If there were no other problems with the book, Wolfe's vigorous defense of becoming "more exclusive and ethnic-focused" (459) should stop in their tracks all who are ready to follow Wolfe's vision for national renewal. The fact that the left thinks racism is everywhere doesn't mean racism is nowhere. Wolfe may eschew contemporary racialist categories, but he doesn't make clear how his ideas on kinship are different from racist ideas of the past that have been used to forbid interracial marriage and to enforce the legal injustice of "separate but equal."

By God's grace, America has made great strides in overcoming racism in the past 60 years. I fail to see how Wolfe's vision isn't a giant step in the wrong direction.

2. Nature of the Church

Key to Wolfe's political theory is the contention that "a Christian nation is a nation whose particular earthly way of life has been ordered to heavenly life in Christ" (174). I will say more about Protestant political thought in the next section. My criticism at present isn't about moral philosophy as much as it's about systematic theology.

To his credit, Wolfe clearly distinguishes between the civil realm and the ecclesial realm. He holds to a (kind of) two-kingdom theology. Wolfe's project doesn't entail theocracy; neither is it theonomy. "The Christian nation is not the spiritual kingdom of Christ or the immanentized eschaton; it is not founded in principles of grace or the Gospel" (186). Nevertheless, civil government ought to direct people to the Christian religion because "an earthly kingdom is a Christian kingdom when it orders the people to the kingdom of heaven" (195).

Wolfe doesn't conflate the church and the world, but he argues that "the Christian nation is the complete image of eternal life on earth." Wolfe rejects the idea of the church as a "colony" or "outpost" of heaven (222). The church may give us the "principal image" of heavenly life (public worship), but only a Christian nation can give us the "complete image" of heavenly life. "For in addition to being a worshipping people, the Christian nation has submitted to magistrates and constitutes a people whose cultural practices and self-conception provide a foretaste of heaven" (223). In short, Wolfe maintains that a Christian nation should be ordered "to make the earthly city an analog of the heavenly city" (209).

I disagree with this conclusion. It's one thing to suggest that civil society may bear resemblance to heavenly realities, or that in the life to come we'll more deeply en-

joy whatever is excellent in this life. It's another to suggest that the analog of the heavenly city is to be found in the earthly city. Contrary to Wolfe, I maintain that the church is an "outpost" or "embassy" or "colony" of the heavenly city.

This comports with the sweep of redemptive history: the reality of heavenly paradise is first found in Eden; then a reflection of Edenic bliss is to be found in the nation of Israel (the land in which God dwells, described with Edenic language and marked by Edenic boundaries); at present God's dwelling is with his people in the church (where the judicial punishments in Israel are recalibrated as ecclesiastical disfellowshipping and the picture of Edenic plenty is manifested by giving generously to our brothers and sisters); and finally at the consummation will the kingdom of this world become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ (Rev. 11:15).

It's only at the end of the age that we can expect heaven to come down to earth. In the time being, the analog of the heavenly city resides in the church. Wolfe quotes Matthew Henry to the effect that "whatever is excellent and valuable in this world" will enter the New Jerusalem (222). But Henry, in that same passage on Revelation 21:9–27, doesn't describe the New Jerusalem as the realization of the earthly city. The New Jerusalem, according to Henry, is a picture of "the church of God in her glorious, perfect, triumphant state" (*Commentary on the Whole Bible*).

After all, the New Jerusalem is a vision of the Bride, the wife of the Lamb, the church (Rev. 21:9). When Hebrews describes the church as "Mount Zion" and "the city of the living God," as "the heavenly Jerusalem" and "the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven" (Heb. 12:22–23), it's hard to conclude that we should call the church an incomplete image of heavenly life.

Christ's chief concern in this age is with the church. While many institutions contribute to earthly life and human flourishing, Jesus didn't promise to build any institution other than the church (Matt. 16:18). The impression one gets from *The Case for Christian Nationalism* is that the church plays merely a supportive spiritual role as part of a larger project that involves the civil realm ordering people to their complete good. Wolfe's vision is nation-centric rather than church-centric.

For example, if we're to experience the Great Renewal, we must hope and pray for a god-like magistrate "whom the people look upon as father or protectorate of the country, . . . a man of dignity and greatness of soul who will lead a people to liberty, virtue, and godliness—to greatness" (279). There isn't much about prayer in the book, which isn't significant in itself, except that the strongest (only?) exhortation to prayer is that we should pray for God to raise up a "Christian prince"—a leader "who would suppress the enemies of God and elevate his people; recover a worshipping people; restore masculine prominence in the land and a spirit of dominion;

affirm and conserve his people and place, not permitting their dissolution or capture; and inspire a love of one's Christian country." Wolfe concludes the chapter by urging the reader to "pray that God would bring about, through a Christian prince, a great renewal" (322).

"Any vision of Christian Nationalism that increases the importance of the nation at the expense of the importance of the church, is a price too high to pay."

Besides questioning the wisdom of wishing for "a measured theocratic Caesarism" and a "world-shaker for our time" (279), I fail to see how this has been, let alone *should* be, the great hope of God's people. I agree with Wolfe that the church shouldn't be hub of political activism, but do we really want to insist that the magistrate has the power to "resolve doctrinal conflicts," to moderate synods, and to "confirm or deny their theological judgments"? Has it generally worked out well for the church when the magistrate "retains his superiority" over the doctrine of the church (313)?

In Wolfe's vision, pastors are left to be "more like chaplains" (470) and the people of God are told to form civil associations "without pastoral leadership" (471). Any vision of Christian Nationalism that increases the importance of the nation at the expense of the importance of the church is a price too high to pay.

3. Protestant Political Thought

Wolfe's use of early Protestant political thought is commendable and shouldn't be dismissed lightly, but there is no *one* Protestant (or Reformed) political theory that must be determinative for all peoples in all places and all times. Let me back my way into that conclusion by making three points.

(1) Wolfe's retrieval project from 16th- and 17th-century sources is largely correct.

Most theologians in the early and high period of Reformed orthodoxy believed in the power of the civil magistrate to call and conduct synods, in the necessity of enforcing both tables of the law, and in the establishment principle (i.e., an official state church supported financially and enjoying certain legal privileges). They maintained that the magistrate had the power to punish heretics, enforce uniformity of doctrine and worship, and use capital punishment (in extreme cases) to protect society from the leavening effects of sin and false teaching.

Coming out of the Catholic Church, Protestant theologians believed strongly in the liberty of conscience. As Wolfe points out, they taught that true inward religion was a matter of persuasion, but this didn't mean the magistrate couldn't use coercive power to suppress false religion (353).

Opponents of these older views should be careful not to overstate their case. It's one thing to make a prudential argument against, say, the enforceability of blasphemy laws in our day. It's another to argue that such laws are in principle wrong. Wolfe is to be commended for having the courage of his convictions and forcing Christians to think more carefully about a host of conclusions that most Western Christians assume just can't be true.

(2) As illuminating as Wolfe's case may be, it in no way constitutes the Protestant position.

Perhaps it can be called "classic" if classic simply means old. But Protestant social thought hasn't been static since the death of Turretin, nor should it be argued that everything after 1700 can be written off as "Enlightenment" thinking. By the end of the 17th century, leading Protestant moral philosophers and natural law thinkers were rethinking the effectiveness of enforced religious uniformity and questioning the biblical justification for granting to the magistrate such far-reaching power in religious matters.

For example, in the 1687 work *Of the Nature and Qualification of Religion in Reference to Civil Society*, Samuel Pufendorf argued that the state was not founded for the sake of religion and that religion, as a part of natural human freedom, cannot be delegated to the sovereign. According to Pufendorf, the magistrate's chief duty was not the heavenly ordering of his society, but the safety and security of his people. That was the end for which civil government was instituted.

To be sure, Pufendorf didn't argue for disestablishment, and he didn't think that the sovereign had to tolerate every kind of religious deviation, but he pushed the Protestant world toward toleration and made the case that the sovereign shouldn't enforce anything more than the basics of natural religion. One can disagree with Pufendorf, but he was an orthodox Lutheran, and his work is rooted in hundreds of biblical texts.

Pufendorf was far from the only thinker moving in this direction. In 1689, John Locke argued in his famous *Letter Concerning Toleration* (1689) that the magistrate may tolerate false religion. "What if a Church be idolatrous, is that also to be tolerated by the magistrate?" Locke asked. His answer proved influential: "What power can be given to the magistrate for the suppression of an idolatrous Church, which may not in time and place be made use of to the ruin of an orthodox one?"

Both Pufendorf and Locke were writing in response to the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes (1685) which forced French Huguenots to convert to Catholicism, face life in

prison, or flee the country. Toleration looked better and more conducive to the aims of Christianity than giving the sovereign final say over the teaching and worship of the church. The move away from the strict enforcement of religious nationalism was promoted most powerfully not by free thinkers and atheists but by committed *Protestants*.

There's a reason Thomas Aikenhead, the 20-year-old student who died by hanging in 1697, was the last person to be executed for blasphemy in Great Britain. Increasingly, Protestants believed there was a better way for diverse religious populations to coexist. At the outset of the book, Wolfe lays down one of his principles: "I do not appeal to historical examples of nationalism, nor do I waste time repudiating 'fascist nationalism'" (26). Considering the real-life aims of the book, it would have been nice to know where Wolfe's version of Christian Nationalism has been implemented and whether it has proven successful at promoting a commodious life as an analog of heaven. But we're never shown Wolfe's vision in living color. Perhaps we're to accept that Christian Nationalism, like socialism, hasn't worked because the *real* thing has never been tried.

For all the faults of America (and there are many), and for all the problems facing Christians today (also, many), you'd be hard-pressed to find a country where orthodox Protestants wield more political power, have more cultural influence, and have more freedom to practice their faith according to the dictates of their conscience.

I'm generally in agreement with [Aaron Renn's "negative world" thesis](#). I think we're in a moment of profound cultural change and that the forces aligned against orthodox Christian faith are many and powerful. It remains to be seen which Christian institutions and individuals will remain faithful. A big sort is already underway.

And yet, there are still more supports for biblical Christianity—institutionally and culturally—than in almost any other country in the world. That's changing, and we shouldn't rejoice in the declension. But I dare say Christianity in this country—without a national religious establishment, without a world-shaking Christian prince, without uniformity in worship and doctrine—has fared pretty well. When talking about earthly realities, it's always helpful to ask the question "Compared to what?" If the American experiment has failed, I'd like to know which country in the past 250 years has gotten a passing grade.

(3) Wolfe's handling of the American founding, in support of his Christian Nationalism project, is not persuasive.

In his last chapter before the epilogue, Wolfe asks the question, "Does the American political tradition permit a Christian self-conception, Christian governments,

and church establishment?” (398). He concludes at the end of the chapter that the founders “all believed that a religious people was necessary for civic morals, public happiness, and effective government, and most (if not all) thought that Christianity provided something distinctive in this regard” (430). The founders also believed, says Wolfe, that the government had a role in supporting true religion and that violations of natural religion could be suppressed. This is all true. America’s founding was much more Christian than today’s strict “wall of separation” advocates would make us think.

But there’s a disconnect between these conclusions and the rest of the book. Wolfe’s book doesn’t simply argue Christianity is necessary for public virtue or that Christianity should have a privileged place in American cultural and political life. Wolfe argues for “theocratic Caesarism,” for a national church establishment, and for a Christian prince to punish false teachers and to regulate external acts of religion—including professions of faith, ceremonies of worship, and the church’s doctrine (356–57). This isn’t what the American founding was about, and in many respects it was precisely what the American colonists wanted to avoid.

As I’ve written before, if the founding era was about one thing, it was about liberty—not the “liberty” of expressive individualism, but a commitment to liberty that believed government existed to protect men’s rights, that government should be limited, and that government’s power should be frustrated by checks and balances. Wolfe says that “Our time calls for a man who can wield formal civil power to great effect and shape the public imagination by means of charisma, gravitas, and personality” (31)—which is the sort of demagogic instinct our Constitutional system was meant to oppose

In Wolfe’s retelling, one is led to believe the political philosophy of the founding era was no different than what Protestants had believed 100 or 200 years ago. For example, Wolfe concludes that John Witherspoon’s “view on the role of government in religion is no different than Cotton Mather’s” (417). This is simply not true.

For starters, Witherspoon taught a course on moral philosophy at Princeton (the lectures from which Wolfe quotes several times). Witherspoon had been shaped by Pufendorf and Hutcheson and the whole tradition of Protestant natural-law ethics. (It was a saying in Glasgow that the students there had to endure classroom instruction “in which . . . their Heads they knock/Grotius, Pufendorf, and Locke.”)

Mather, on the other hand, derided the discipline of moral philosophy as “infidelity reduced to a system.” Witherspoon and Mather shared many doctrinal commitments in common, but they didn’t conceive of church-state relations in the same way.

As a member of the New Jersey Provincial Congress, Witherspoon and the other delegates (including other prominent Presbyterians) defended religious freedom and opposed religious establishments. Article XVIII of the Constitution they framed says the following:

That no person shall ever within this colony be deprived of the inestimable privilege of worshipping Almighty God in a manner agreeable to the dictates of his own conscience; nor under any pretence whatsoever compelled to attend any place of worship, contrary to his own faith and judgment; not shall any person within this colony ever be obliged to pay titles, taxes, or any other rates, for the purpose of building or repairing any church or churches, place or places of worship, or for the maintenance of any ministry or ministry, contrary to what he believes to be right or has deliberately or voluntarily engaged to perform.

To be sure, what New Jersey did in 1776 would take another 50 years to take root in the rest of the American states. My argument isn't that state establishments didn't exist at the time of the founding, or even that it was wrong that they did exist. My argument is that many orthodox Christians opposed these establishments and opposed them on historical, prudential, and biblical grounds.

Knowing that James Madison—Witherspoon's student at Princeton—refused to give the magistrate authority over the external acts of religion, Wolfe is at pains to prove that Madison's view was "extreme" and that his "importance in the founding era on religious liberty is exaggerated" (423). Perhaps, but if Madison's views were not as important, it's because the views of Presbyterians and Baptists were *more* important. Madison's famous *Memorial and Remonstrance* was written in opposition to Patrick Henry's plan to tax property owners to fund ministers from all Protestant denominations. Madison's *Memorial* was filed with the general assembly in Virginia with 1,552 signatures.

The most popular petition against Henry's proposal, however, was filed by Presbyterians, Baptists, and other dissenters. Their proposal, which made many of the same arguments as Madison's, garnered 4,899 signatures. These dissenters knew that a pan-Protestant establishment had never worked (or even been attempted). Establishment always meant privileging one denomination at the expense of another, which is why disestablishment happened most quickly in religiously diverse states, and why it happened most slowly where one denomination had been dominant.

To spend time dreaming of a pan-Protestant establishment in the United States today—with 330 million people, and with a Protestantism that now includes a large number of Pentecostals and charismatics, plus a black tradition and a liberal tradi-

tion, and hundreds of denominations that don't see eye to eye on a thousand different things—is a dream that will never be realized. And for that we should be thankful.

Let me make a final comment about Presbyterians, since I am one and so is Wolfe. For better or worse (and I would say for better), the Presbyterian view on church-state relations changed in America. From the reorganization plan in 1787 to the first General Assembly in 1789, Witherspoon played a key role in establishing a national Presbyterian church, and when the ecclesiastical constitution was finally adopted, the Westminster Confession had been altered to create more distance between church and state. The edition of the Westminster Standards used by the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) contains those 1789 revisions that limited the power of the civil magistrate over religious matters.

Moreover, these changes didn't originate in the 1780s. In conjunction with the Adopting Act of 1729, the Presbyterian church in the American colonies already allowed that chapters 20 and 23 of the Westminster Confession weren't binding on ministers and that ministers need not receive “those articles in any such sense as to suppose the civil magistrate hath a controlling power over Synods with respect to the exercise of their ministerial authority.” With few exceptions, Presbyterians in this country have never held to the “classic” Reformed position on the power of the civil magistrate.

4. Way Forward

This review has already gone on too long, but there's one final point to make: the book, for all its serious work of theological and philosophical retrieval, is hard to take seriously after you read the epilogue. Without the epilogue, the book would still provoke a strong reaction, but one could argue that at the heart of Wolfe's vision is a return to the political ordering of Western Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries. I don't think that's the right vision, but it's worthwhile to consider why many of our theological forebears thought so differently about how to order their societies. There is much to learn from these earlier theologians, even if we don't think it necessary to implement their political ideas in our own day.

But the epilogue gives the whole book a different feel. Wolfe's epilogue purports to answer the question “Now what?”—but the chapter consists of a string of loosely connected topics that can fairly be described as a 38-part rant. Several examples will suffice to justify this conclusion.

On the problem with progress:

Every step of progress is overcoming you. Ask yourself, “What sort of villain does each event of progress have in common?” The straight white male. That is the chief out-group of New America, the embodiment of regression and oppression. (436)

On living under a gynocracy:

We live under a gynocracy—a rule by women. This may not be apparent on the surface, since men still run many things. But the governing virtues of America are feminine vices, associated with certain feminine virtues, such as empathy, fairness, and equality. (448)

On the many problems with gynocracy:

Are you a minority and have a grievance? Signal displeasure to white women, even blame them for your pain, and women will shower you with money and retweets. . . . Consider also child transgenderism, which seems to be facilitated in large part by over-empathetic and sometimes deranged mothers. The most insane and damaging sociological trends of our modern society are female-driven. The gynocracy is self-destructive and breeds social disorder. (451)

On women and credentialism:

As academic institutions cater to and graduate more and more women, credentialism is on the rise. . . . This is why women place their credentials—“Dr.” or “PhD” or “Professor,” or even “MA in theology”—in their social media name. (453)

On the ruling class:

There is no robust common ground here. There is no credibility we can establish with them. Unavoidably, we are threats to their regime. Christian nationalism is an existential threat to the secularist regime. They are enemies of the church and, as such, enemies of the human race. (456)

On the need to resist modern life:

I’m not going to tell you how far to go in this, but it is both good for you and your family and it prepares for a better future. I expect that most committed Christian nationalists will be farmers, homesteaders, and ranchers. (461)

On choosing a career:

I say now [to my kids]: “Find a career that maximizes your autonomy from the forces of the secularist ruling class.” If you are a white, heterosexual, cis-gendered male, then the world will not offer you any favors. Indeed, your career advancement depends on sacrificing your self-respect by praising and pandering to your inferiors who rule over you. Even the CEOs, in the end, are dominated by woke scolds. (464)

On the embarrassment of low testosterone:

Christian nationalism should have a strong and austere aesthetic. I was dismayed when I saw the attendees of a recent PCA General Assembly—men in wrinkled, short-sleeve, golf shirts, sitting plump in their seats. We have to do better. Pursue your potential. Lift weights, eat right, and lose the dad bod. We don’t all have to become bodybuilders, but we ought to be men of power and endurance. We cannot achieve our goals with such a flabby aesthetic vision and under the control of modern nutrition. Sneering at this aesthetic vision, which I fully expect to happen, is pure cope. Grace does not destroy T-levels; grace does not perfect testosterone into estrogen. If our opponents want to be fat, have low testosterone, and chug vegetable oil, let them. It won’t be us. (469–70)

“If critical race theory teaches that America has failed, that the existing order is irredeemable, that Western liberalism was a mistake from the beginning, that the current system is rigged against our tribe, and that we ought to make ethnic-consciousness more important—it seems to me that Wolfe’s project is the rightwing version of these same impulses.”

That Wolfe thinks all this is concerning. That he wrote it down is extra troubling. That he and his editors thought it a good idea to end the book with a series of vituperative harangues is baffling. Is this the civilizational answer we’ve been looking for—living off the grid, complaining about women, complaining about the regime, complaining about how hard it is to be a white male, warning about the globalists, calling out the dangers of vegetable oil, and chastising Presbyterians with dad bods?

Besides trafficking in sweeping and unsubstantiated claims about the totalizing control of the Globalist American Empire and the gynocracy, Wolfe’s apocalyptic vision—for all of its vitriol toward the secular elites—borrows liberally from the playbook of the left. He not only redefines the nature of oppression as

psychological oppression (making it easier to justify extreme measures and harder to argue things aren’t as bad as they seem), he also rallies the troops (figuratively, but perhaps also literally?) by reminding them they’re victims. “The world is out to get

you, and people out there hate you” is not a message that will ultimately help white men or any other group that considers themselves oppressed.

When Wolfe sarcastically thanks those who “woke many from their dogmatic slumber” and rejoices that “more are awakening each day,” one might be forgiven for seeing his version of Christian Nationalism as a form of right-wing wokeism. What does it mean to be woke if not that we’re awakened to the “reality” that oppression is everywhere, extreme measures are necessary, and the regime must be overthrown?

If critical race theory teaches that America has failed, that the existing order is irredeemable, that Western liberalism was a mistake from the beginning, that the current system is rigged against our tribe, and that we ought to make ethnic consciousness *more* important—it seems to me that Wolfe’s project is the right-wing version of these same impulses.

Better Strategy: Confidence, Courage, Christlikeness

So what is my answer to our national and civilizational collapse?

First of all, we should remember that there are *much* bigger problems than national and civilizational collapse. Like sin, flesh, and the devil. Like death and hell (Matt. 10:28). As a pastor, I’m also concerned about the peace and purity of the church. Surely it’s significant that these discussions around Christian Nationalism are taking place when it has never been less likely to happen.

On the one hand, that makes sense. We’re grasping for some alternative to the rise of militant progressivism. And yet, considering that there are no plans afoot to establish a Protestant or Presbyterian colony on Mars, we should hold to our political blueprints—the ones that have no possibility of being achieved—loosely and charitably. I fear the practical payoff from this discussion will be very small, but the potential for division in the church will be great.

But if we must say something about a strategy for national renewal, it’s multifaceted and rather ordinary. We need confidence, courage, and Christlikeness. We need faithful churches, gospel preaching, and prayer. We should contend for the faith. We should disciple our churches and catechize our kids. We should create new—and steward existing—civic, educational, and ecclesiastical institutions. We should love our neighbors and share our faith. We should press home the truths of natural and revealed religion in the public square and get involved in the political process. Where possible, most of us should get married and have children (the more the merrier).

Our “strategy” is not one thing. It’s many things. It’s cultivating the virtues of prudence, justice, wisdom, and temperance (and understanding how each virtue needs

the other three). It's building bridges and building walls. It's speaking the truth and offering grace. It's striving to grow in every fruit of the Spirit. It's asking that God would give us every virtue of grace. It's modeling an alternative culture as the City of God, and it's trying to be salt and light among the City of Man.

“I love my nation and want to see it become more Christian—mostly by regeneration, but also by the good that comes from cultural Christianity. I just don't think that equals Christian Nationalism.”

I lament that America is much less Christian than it used to be. I want Christians in the fray, not simply negotiating the terms of our surrender. I want Christian people and Christian ideas to influence our nation for good. I pray for Christ and his kingdom to come. I want godly and wise magistrates. I want to see the sexual revolution turned back.

I love my nation and want to see it become more Christian—mostly by regeneration, but also by the good that comes from cultural Christianity. We should pray and labor for all of that. I just don't think that equals Christian Nationalism as it has now been offered to us.

I know the instinct that assumes that whatever position seems most “conservative” must be correct, especially if that position is hated by the left. But that's not a fool-proof instinct. And besides, Wolfe makes clear that his project is not “conservative.” We are better to see Wolfe's vision as one of several postliberal ideologies that are growing on the radical right.

Read the chapter on “The Nationalist” in Matthew Rose's 2021 book *A World After Liberalism* and you'll see that many of the central ideas from Samuel Francis—the impotence of the conservative movement, the need to stir up the grievances of Middle America, the call for distinct ethnicities (read: white) to stop the self-harm and defend their own nation, the insistence that America is dead and revolution is necessary, and the encouragement to make use of Caesarism and the mass loyalties that a charismatic leader inspires—are present in Wolfe's own vision.

Biblical instincts are better than nationalist ones, and the ethos of the Christian Nationalism project fails the biblical smell test. Will the person who goes all in on this book—the person who says “yes” to every rant, the person who feels drawn to the vision of ethnic separation, the person who is just biding his time until the Christian prince arrives and the revolution is ready to start—be apt to grow in faith, hope, and love (1 Cor. 13:13)? Will he be led to rejoice insofar as he shares in Christ's sufferings (1 Pet. 4:13)? And if the end of things is at hand, will he be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of his prayers (1 Pet. 4:7)? Or will this book help us return reviling for reviling (1 Pet. 2:23)?

We aren't the first Christians to live in trying times; most Christians around the world, and millions of Christians throughout history, would likely trade their circumstances for ours. The cultural upheaval we're living through will be a means of providential grace if it leads us to think more carefully about civil society, to contend for the truth more persuasively, to commit ourselves more fully to Jesus and his church, and to grow in that holiness without which no one will see the Lord (Heb. 12:14).

Certainly, let us pray for a great renewal, but let us also remember that the renewal we need most in our world and in our land is the restoration of true doctrine, the reformation of our lives, and the revival of that divine and supernatural light which shines in our hearts to show us the glory of God in the face of Christ (2 Cor. 4:6).

Kevin DeYoung (PhD, University of Leicester) is senior pastor of Christ Covenant Church in Matthews, North Carolina, Council member of The Gospel Coalition, and associate professor of systematic theology at Reformed Theological Seminary (Charlotte). He has written numerous books, including *Just Do Something*. Kevin and his wife, Trisha, have nine children: Ian, Jacob, Elizabeth, Paul, Mary, Benjamin, Tabitha, Andrew, and Susannah.

