



BIBLEWAY MINISTRIES

MAKING A DIFFERENCE—THE BIBLE WAY



Putting God First: Nationalism and True Worship

Can a nationalistic church worship God? Patriarch Kirill recently [stated in a homily](#), "May the Lord preserve the Russian land. When I say 'Russian,' I use the ancient expression . . . the land which now includes Russia and Ukraine and Belarus and other tribes and peoples. That the Lord may protect the Russian land against external enemies, against internal disorders, that the unity of our Church may strengthen and that by God's mercy all the temptations, diabolical attacks, provocations may retreat and that our devout people in Ukraine may enjoy peace and tranquility - these are our prayers today."

Patriarch Kirill is the head of the Russian Orthodox Church. His words sound good, but something is wrong. In a subtle way, he redefined Russia to include Russia, Ukraine, Belarus and other "tribes and peoples." His language echoes the ideas expressed by Russian President Vladimir Putin that [Ukraine is not an independent country](#), but a part of the Russian mainland.

This should come as no surprise, because the [Russian Orthodox Church has been closely aligned with Putin](#) since he took office in 2000. The timing of this homily, the Sunday after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, should also come as no surprise. In the patriarch's opinion, Russia is simply reclaiming territory which it already owns.

How could the head of a church refuse to speak out in defense of innocent people? To understand his position, we first need to understand what nationalism is.

Nationalism Defined

Nationalism is the belief that [people are divided into cultural groups](#) based on common language, religion, ethnicity or culture. A nationalist believes each group should have its own government which should, in turn, protect the nation's cultural identity. If we viewed the Russian

landscape as nationalists, we would believe Russia extends beyond its national borders to neighbors who historically share its language, religion, ethnicity and culture. We would also support the government's efforts to expand its territory for the sake of strengthening its cultural identity, even if those efforts encroached upon the right of other nations to exist as independent countries.

The problem with nationalism lies in misplaced priorities and a wrong view of who is ultimately in control. Instead of trusting in a sovereign, omnipotent God to change hearts and minds through His Word and the faithful proclamation of the gospel, nationalists lean on the arms of powerful political allies to legislate change. Or they seek power and influence for themselves so as to force their beliefs upon others. Historically, the Russian Orthodox Church has done both. Neither way is God's way.

In his blog, "[Is Christian Nationalism Faithfulness? 4 Lessons from the Constantine Years](#)," Daniel McCoy says, "Christian nationalism can feel like biblical faithfulness — until you read some of the awful events that resulted from state-and-church power alliances. Inquisitions. Pogroms. Crusader violence. Expulsion of Jews from entire countries. You read about some of those, and it makes you rethink the logic of Christians trying to advance Christianity through political alliances."

At the beginning of Christianity, followers of Jesus advanced the Kingdom of God by sharing the gospel and spreading the love of Christ as He commanded ([John 15:12](#)). But the Church's gospel emphasis changed when [Christianity became the national religion](#) under Emperor Constantine. Under the influence of the Roman government, the early Christian Church became nationalistic, and suffered four significant losses. *(Continued on next page)*

Four Losses of Nationalistic Christians

See if you can identify any of these losses in the modern Russian Orthodox Church's view of the Russian war with Ukraine:

1. The Early Church lost touch with hurting people. Power, riches and influence have a strange way of corrupting our hearts and making us insensitive to outsiders and outcasts. Instead of compassionately rescuing the perishing and caring for the dying, we risk ignoring, belittling or dismissing them because they do not share our views.

2. The Early Church lost the courage to speak out against the wrongdoing of those in power. When we align ourselves with a particular political party or leader in order to exert our influence over the political process, we often sacrifice our biblical convictions. Instead of speaking the truth in love, we end up watering down our message.

3. The Early Church lost her discernment of doctrinal and moral compromise. Chuck Colson said of government power, "Governments, with rare exceptions, seek to expand their power beyond the mandate to restrain evil, preserve order, and promote justice. Most often they do this by venturing into religious or moral areas."

When the government uses the Church to advance its political agenda, as the Russian government has done with the Russian Orthodox Church, the end result is neither religious nor moral. Instead of helping the Church fulfill its gospel mission, government alliances slowly gain power over the Church. This relationship often trickles down into the Church's core doctrinal beliefs so it loses its distinct Christian identity and becomes a glove manipulated by the government's hand.

4. The Early Church lost its unique, enduring legacy. Governments and political leaders rise and fall, but the Kingdom of God is forever. Aligning ourselves with fragile, temporary kingdoms of men and their changing values guts the Church of its eternal perspective and mission. It is like shifting a powerful telescope from gazing upon a distant galaxy to focus on a passing aircraft.

The Word of God endures forever. The Church endures because of its foundation in the Living Word — Jesus Christ, who conquered death and

claimed all power in Heaven and on Earth ([Matthew 28:18](#)). Therefore it is only the Church's faith in Jesus, not its strategic ties with those in power, that will preserve its legacy as a beacon of light to the world.

Putting God First

As you can see, nationalism causes Christians to misplace their priorities. What we prioritize the most becomes an object of worship. What we worship owns a controlling interest in our hearts. This is the source of our happiness, the center of our thoughts, the source of our identity, the driving force behind our actions, the thermostat of our emotions, the compass for our morality. Tell me what you love the most, and I'll tell you what you worship.

It is good to love our country and our national heritage. It is also good to love liberty, justice and other moral principles — God just wants us to love Him more. He wants to be Number 1 in our priorities.

It is the first and most important commandment: "Thou shalt have no other gods before me." ([Exodus 20:3](#)) Get this right, and everything else falls into place. Get it wrong, and life becomes an empty, endless struggle for purpose and fulfillment. Putting God first means we look to Him for wisdom instead of news analysts. It is bringing our anxieties about the war to Him in prayer instead of wringing our hands in fear. It is resorting to Scripture for our mental health when we feel overwhelmed by the weight of the world's problems. It is trusting Him to take care of us and living a life of true worship.

True worship is based on love for God that extends beyond Sunday church to all of life. For the Christian, life itself should be an act of worship.

As Christians we are citizens of a Heavenly Kingdom which cannot be shaken, unlike the kingdoms of this world ([Hebrews 12:28](#)). We love and pray for the peace of those whose lives have been disrupted and have lost loved ones in Ukraine on account of Russian nationalism. Even as we seek national welfare, let us keep our eyes on Jesus, and trust in Him. As Mark Tooley said in a [World News Op-Ed](#) piece, "We love and serve our country best by trusting God foremost." When this happens, this is real worship.

