



# Reviews

**ANOTHER GOSPEL: CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM AND THE CRISIS OF EVANGELICAL IDENTITY**, by Joel Looper, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2024. 150 pages + iv. \$19.99.

The term “evangelical” has meant many things. For sixteenth century Lutherans, the term signaled a stress on the gospel, understood biblically as the proclamation of God’s unmerited favor in Christ. In eighteenth and nineteenth century Anglo-Protestantism, it referred to pietist-influenced dissenters who emphasized (in David Bebbington’s terms) conversionism, activism, crucicentrism, and biblicism. In mid-twentieth century America, it meant the evangelism-focused religion of Billy Graham.

For a decade, I’ve told students that we have entered a fourth era of the meaning of “evangelical.” Today, “evangelical” in the United States means a political persuasion that is only loosely related to biblical religion. Its concerns are rooted in a perceived loss of cultural power, leading conservative Christians to focus their rhetoric, activism, and philanthropy on select issues like abortion, education, and religious liberty. This evangelicalism is a shell of its sixteenth century self.

In *Another Gospel*, Joel Looper likewise criticizes evangelicalism for its Babylonian captivity to American politics. But he is less concerned with whatever (admittedly frayed) threads connect early Lutheranism with twenty-first century conservative culture warriors. Instead, Looper lightly traces the long tradition of the American Protestant substitution of nation for church, beginning with John Winthrop, and including such pivotal figures as Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King, Jr. In every generation, political leaders sacralized the nation at the expense of the church, compromising the gospel by using its terms to further earthly projects. Because Christians cannot rely on American culture to reinforce their worldview, the power grab has become more explicit and its tactics more brazen in recent years. With the notable exception of the messianic role played by Donald Trump himself, little changed when evangelicals began

to embrace Trump in 2016. “The Trump strategy is the Moral Majority strategy retooled for a minority Christian America” (53).

This spiritual problem, contends Looper, goes back much farther than the North American colonies. It was, in fact, the defining crisis of the first generation of Christianity. According to Looper, the issue the Apostle Paul contended with among the “Judaizers” was Israelite nationalism. To insist that gentile Christians exhibit the marks of Jewish national identity (like circumcision) was to proclaim “another gospel” that was not the good news of Jesus Christ (11). Yet because Christianity flourished among gentiles as a persecuted minority, Paul’s (and Jesus’s) vision of the church as alien in the world prevailed—until Constantine. The marriage of church and state, argues Looper, always dissolves the former into the latter. It is a perpetual temptation for Christians to seek earthly power, selling their spiritual birthright for a political pottage. As his main adversary, Looper engages with Stephen Wolfe’s *The Case for Christian Nationalism* (2022), which, according to Looper, “manages to leave Christ completely out of the equation” (61). To help readers see the disturbing logic and implications of Christian nationalism, Looper spends a chapter describing the phenomenon in a much less familiar cultural context: Putin’s Russia.

Looper argues that Christians are meant to follow “gospel politics.” The Christian community is *church*, not nation. Its uniqueness, reason for being, and gift to the world is to point to God’s coming kingdom by living in alignment with Jesus’s politics, which turn all worldly politics on their heads. The last will be first. The meek inherit the earth. The greatest are servants.

A strength of this book is that it is written by an insider. Looper owns his theologically grounded conservative social views. Yet by recognizing that the gospel condemns wielding political power in the name of Christ, he can see what other evangelicals miss. For all the boons of democracy, the gospel can flourish under any form of government. Superficially similar calls for evangelicals to withdrawal from politics, like Rod Dreher’s *The Benedict Option*, are cynical “backup plan[s]” (52). Christians have no right to privileged status or even a comfortable existence. Looper helpfully employs the Lutheran concept (revived by Bonhoeffer) of *status confessionis*—only when the gospel is threatened must Christians *as the church* act politically. But this political action will generally be resistance and (I would add) accepts the political and legal ramifications.

This book joins a growing body of literature condemning the political idolatry of American evangelicalism. Looper’s passion is clear on every

page, which is understandable, but the result is a work that is less disciplined and detailed than, say, journalist Tim Alberta's *The Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory*. Not every (even sympathetic) reader will agree with Looper's understanding of "gospel." This plays out in his portrayal of the early Christian circumcision debate as a contest with Jewish nationalism rather than a rejection of trust in all human works and identities (Gal 3:28). Although contrasting gospel politics with worldly politics is illuminating, something is lost by describing the gospel as politics. The New Testament has an eschatological vision for a godly *polis* (Rev 21:2), but the concept of the "political" seems to accept the terms set by the world, potentially reducing the gospel to a radical first-century Jewish take on a Greek philosophical concept. For this reason, *Another Gospel* exhibits a weakness common in evangelical critiques of evangelical power-mongering: it offers little positive vision of Christian engagement in earthly politics. Even if one advocates full-blown Anabaptist separatism (which Looper does not), "gospel politics" cannot serve as a practical alternative to societal needs. Further resources from the Lutheran tradition (law and gospel, *simul*, two kingdoms) would help evangelical prophets like Looper turn the corner from critique to construction. Nevertheless, *Another Gospel* makes a clear and necessary claim for our confused age: the church will endure to the end of the age; but those who take up the sword—even with the intent to protect or enhance the church—will die by the sword.

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