
Whose Kingdom, Which Lord?

An Exploration of Jesus & Nationalism

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small groups • bible studies • personal devotions



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I want to invite you into a five week journey exploring the connections in the New Testament between Jesus and Nationalism. For many, this will be a challenging topic to dive into, especially if you are an American. This is because from a very early age we are taught that the United States is a “Christian Nation” and that one of our callings is to take this country back for God. But, what if what we were taught is not the whole truth on this matter biblically speaking? It is to such a question that this study will explore. I do not write with a particular political bias or agenda in mind, but am simply a member of the Kingdom of God who is trying to sort out what it means to follow a crucified peasant revolutionary from the First Century. May your quest together point your hearts and actions towards that reality!

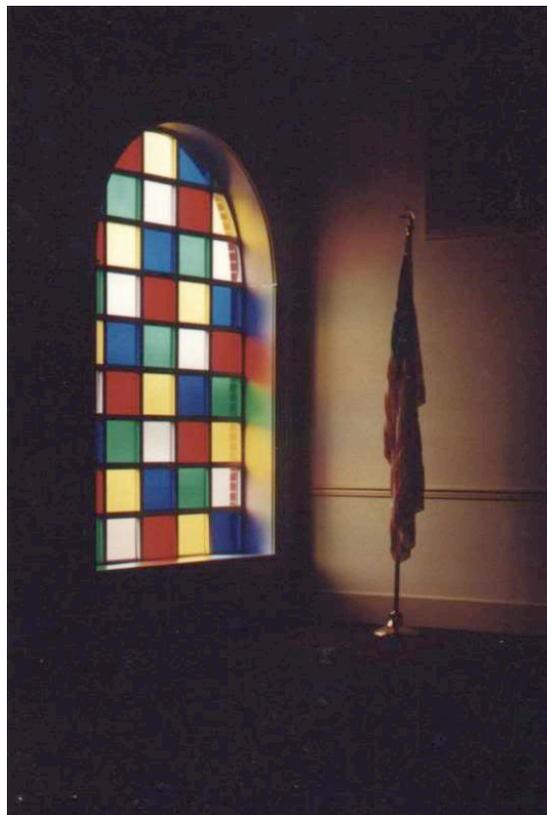
Grace and Peace,

Kurt Willems

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How to Use this Study

This is divided into five separate studies that each build upon the other. If anyone misses a week, it will be to the benefit of everyone involved to catch up on the readings. Besides this, there are a few other tips that will make your discussions the most productive as possible:

- Make sure that prayer is integrated into each gathering.
- Take turns reading various sections or paragraphs to involve each member of the group. You can do this in a circle if you would like.
- The questions listed are there for your benefit. Utilize them, but do not feel bound to them. Attend to the immediate needs of your group.
- Give everyone a voice. Don't let one voice overpower all of the others. Allow for opposing opinions.
- Spread the word!!!! If you like this study resource, it is FREE for a reason! Please send people to my website to download this and all of the other free resources.
- Tell me your stories! If you use this study, please tell me how it went by visiting the “contact” section of my website: <http://thepangeablog.com/contact/>

Whose Kingdom, Which Lord?

Jesus & Nationalism

A DISTURBING ALLEGIANCE (WEEK 1)



Image by: <http://www.mcnaughtonart.com>

This is a picture that made a lot of *buzz* on the Internet. An artist named Jon McNaughton painted it. As you can see, the focal point of the picture is Jesus who is holding the US Constitution in one hand and pointing to it with the other.

I can imagine that some good folks see this picture as exactly what our country needs to remember, that Jesus must be the center of everything we do as a nation. I want to commend this

kind of first impression, for if our desire is anything less than putting Jesus in the center, then we miss the point of living. Jesus must be central in all we do.

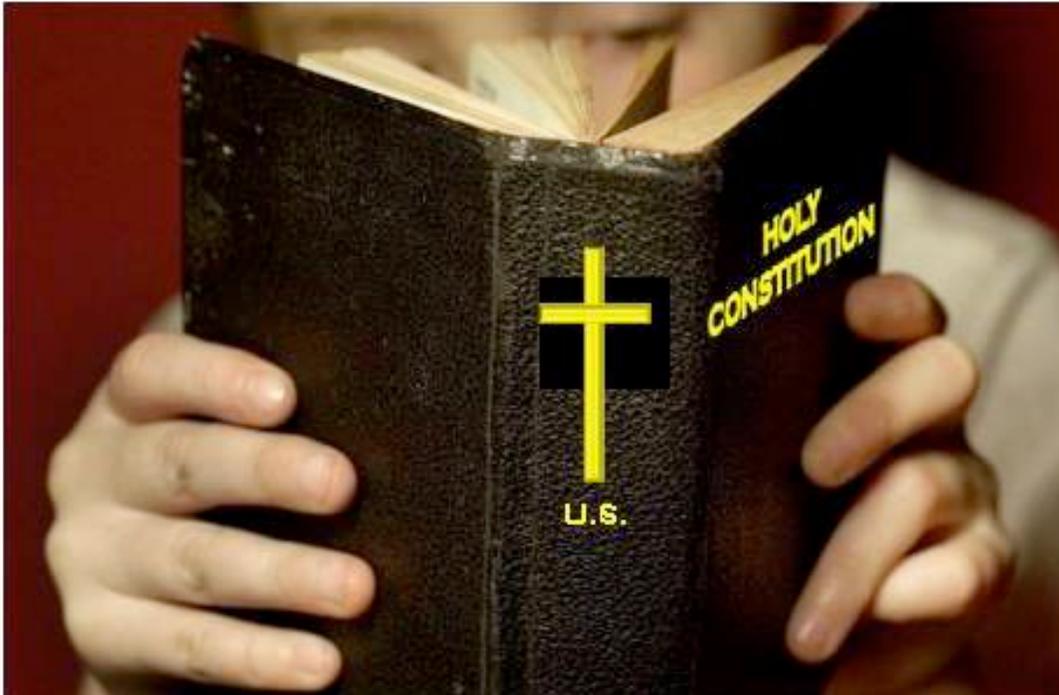
However, I also think that there is a second kind of reaction that is also appropriate for a first impression. Some people may view this picture with a bit of suspicion. Perhaps you love the fact that you live in a nation that has given you opportunities to experience freedom and privilege in ways that the rest of the world does not get to enjoy. However, you might be a bit concerned about an image like this that seems to link Jesus so closely with our national identity. For this second kind of reaction (and especially if someone is originally from another country), this image may beg an important question: *Does Jesus play favorites when it comes to the kingdoms of this world?* This question has become more important in modern times as we truly have become a globalized world. To take this question a step further, today we need to also ask: *How does government and faith interact in the New Testament and what implications should this have on our lives as citizens of the Kingdom of God? Whose Kingdom and Which Lord ought to receive our allegiance?*

It may help to understand that when this picture came out, it was the topic of many of those odd email forwards that often circulate in the evangelical web. Although this painting was created by a Mormon artist, Christians embraced it with open arms. In Mormon theology, where America plays a unique role, this image makes sense. But the question at hand involves the relationship that followers of the Biblical Jesus ought to have with the state. In order to wrestle with this with integrity two things will be required of us: 1) examine the relevant Biblical texts and 2) study them within their cultural backdrop as much as possible.



Questions For Reflection

1. What was your ‘gut’ reaction to the image above before engaging the reading? Why did it make you feel as it did?
2. Do you think that Jesus ordained or inspired the US Constitution? How should we compare it with Scripture or is such a correlation dishonoring to God?



3. What symbols are you comfortable with in American culture to embrace alongside Christian symbols? Flag? “God bless America?” Others?
4. Read Genesis 12.1-3 & Matthew 28.16-20. How does God feel about the globe? How should this cause us to think about our nation in relation to all of the others?
5. Read Ephesians 2.11-22 (preferably in the NIV 2011 edition or TNIV). What is the point that Paul is getting at in this passage regarding Jews and Gentiles? What is the significance of the phrase “new humanity” to this discussion of national identity? How are we to understand citizenship language that is employed here?

Assignment for the Week

Examine your everyday life and ask: Does the identity of America and Christianity blend together in a way that is healthy or harmful for the kingdom of God? Share findings next week.

Final Thoughts

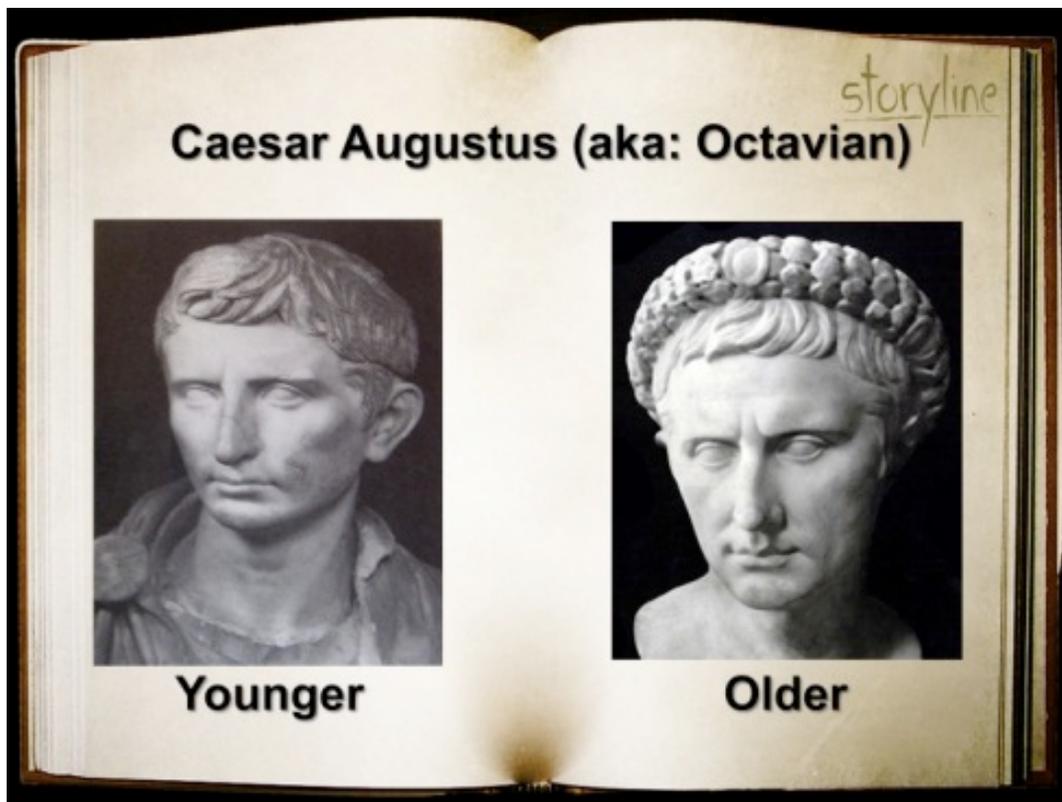
Is it possible that American pride can override our calling to have ‘pride’ in the Kingdom of God? That is a foundational question that will be discussed throughout this study. No doubt, I have an opinion on this matter but my intention is not to coerce you into blindly believing whatever I think. My hope is that you will walk away from this series of discussions energized about God’s Kingdom which is fully revealed in Jesus Christ.

Whose Kingdom, Which Lord?

Jesus & Nationalism

JESUS' BACKDROP - CAESAR AUGUSTUS & EMPIRE (WEEK 2)

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. Luke 2:1



This is the beginning of the wonderful passage that we read with our family each Christmas. This first verse is usually taken for granted, but what if we were to land right here and ask a few questions? First, *who is Caesar Augustus?* What makes this man so important that he gets mentioned in the same narrative as the birth of Jesus? Second, *why does this text mention the “Roman world?”* How is this significant in regards to Jesus’ situation when he is born? Are these two references to Caesar and to Rome simply to mark a specific moment in history?

Perhaps, Luke wants to give us clues about when Jesus was born? Based on the details in this chapter, it is quite easy to assume that this is his aim. But what if there is something more to Luke's method of writing than simply marking dates. Maybe he is telling two stories at once: the story of Jesus' birth and an underlying story of how Jesus related to the Roman Empire.

We actually know quite a bit about Augustus from historical accounts. He became the ruler of the Roman Empire in 31 BC after the murder of his father Julius Caesar. He would be hailed as a hero who ushered in a time of peace after the strife of civil war. The themes that were proclaimed during his reign were those of freedom, justice, peace, and salvation. Whenever these ideas were announced to people, they were called "good news" or "gospel." Augustus would be called the great "savior" who had brought prosperity to the people of the Roman Empire. At least to those who had power and prestige.

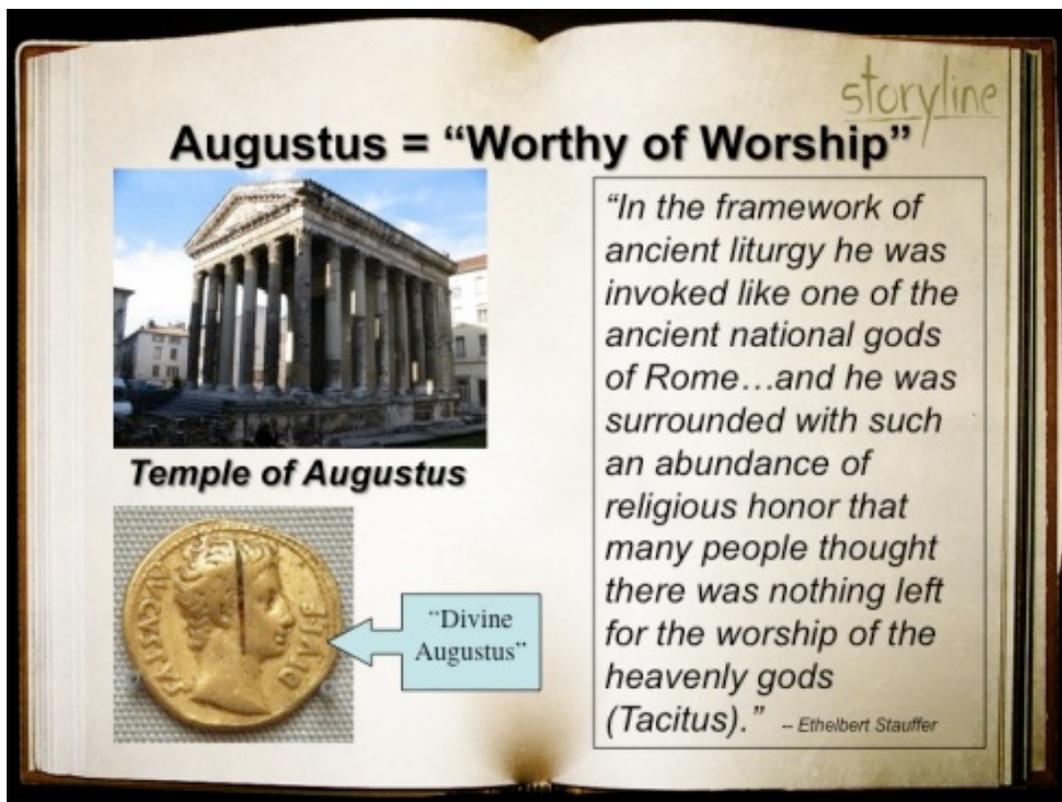
For an estimated ninety-seven percent of the empire, poverty was the byproduct of such prosperity. The masses of people in the Roman Empire were taxed unbearable amounts, which caused much poverty. Augustus made his capital city of Rome the priority for his social programs while he taxed the territories outside of Rome in excruciating numbers. For instance, he would give all the people in his Capitol city a monthly distribution of grain.



This was a strategy to keep his residents loyal to his lordship. In order to accomplish this he had to tax those in the outer territories in large quantities. It would have taken between 200,000 and 400,000 tons of grain each year to feed the whole city of Rome. All of this grain is believed to have been imported. But if Rome is taking all this grain, what does the rest of the world eat? And how does the grain farmer make any kind of significant living? You may be thinking to yourself: If conditions were so bad for so many, couldn't they have revolted? But you have to

remember that Augustus controlled one of the most powerful armies in history. As we have already said, he was hailed as bringing peace to the empire, but this was maintained through fear. If you mess with Rome, you will get whipped out by our military. If you do what you are told, you will be able to survive. It was the old peace through strength mentality that kept the Roman Empire strong.

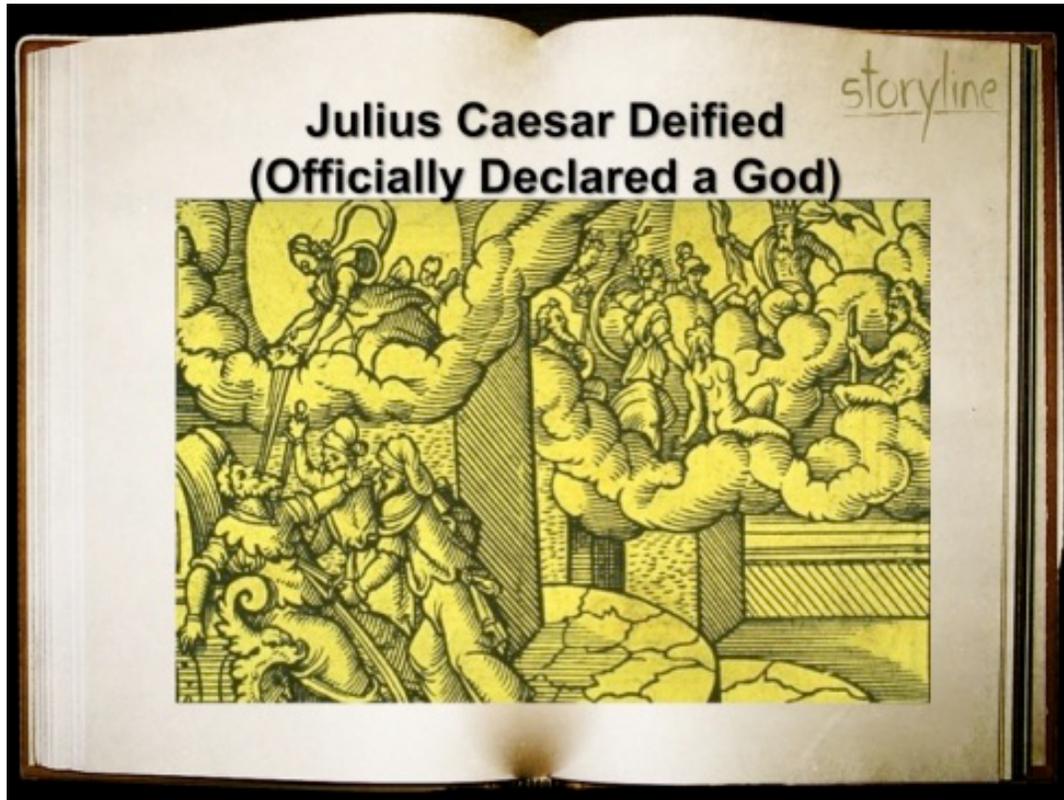
Besides maintaining stability through taxation and military threat, the Roman Empire also established an imperial religion. The name Augustus was one that was given to him by the Senate of Rome. Prior to this he had been called Octavius. Augustus literally means “worthy of worship.” And indeed he became the object of worship throughout the Empire. One scholar



named Ethelbert Stauffer states: “In the framework of ancient liturgy he was invoked like one of the ancient national gods of Rome...and he was surrounded with such an abundance of religious honour that many people thought there was nothing left for the worship of the heavenly gods (Tacitus).”¹ Not only had he been declared “worthy of worship” but his father Julius was

¹ Ethelbert Stauffer, “Augustus and Jesus,” in *Christ and the Caesars* (1952, Wittig Verlag; reprint, Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2008), 96-97.

divinized after he died and this gave Augustus grounds for claiming the title: “son of god.”² There is an inscription that was written around 9 BC that gives us some insight to the way in which he was being hailed as more than a man:



The most divine Caesar...we should consider equal to the Beginning of all things...; for when everything was falling [into disorder] and tending toward dissolution, he restored it once more and gave to the whole world a new aura; Caesar...the common good Fortune of all...the beginning of life and vitality....All the cities unanimously adopt the birthday of the divine Caesar as the new beginning of the year.... Whereas Providence, which has regulated our whole existence...has brought our life to the climax of perfection in giving to us [the emperor] Augustus, whom it [Providence] filled with strength for the welfare of men, and who being sent to us and our descendants as Savior, has put an end to war and has set all things in order; and [whereas,] having become [god] manifest (phaneis), Caesar has fulfilled all the hopes of earlier times ...in surpassing all the benefactors who preceded him..., and whereas, finally, the birthday of the god [Augustus] has been for the

² N.T. Wright, Paul: In Fresh Perspective (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005), 64.

whole world the beginning of good news (euangelion) concerning him [therefore let a new era begin from his birth]. (OGIS 2.#458)³

Not only was Augustus worshipped through inscribed poetic language, but he was also worshiped through statues and temples that were built in his honor, sacrifices, and the use of coins. Coins have been found from this time period that had the face of the Emperor with the inscription “Divine Caesar.”⁴

Questions For Reflection

1. What are your initial thoughts after hearing the backdrop of Jesus’ story? Is this new information and is it helpful for putting the Bible in context?
2. What would it be like to be a poor Jewish farmer in the First Century? How would you view the empire?
3. Notice that there was no middle class in Jesus’ day. You either had power and prestige or you didn’t, there was no in-between. Did you know that many have estimated that the US consumes about 40% of all global resources when we account for only 4-6% of the world’s population? There are several other staggering statistics that demonstrate the way the US is privileged compared to the rest of the world.
 - One billion people in the world do not have access to clean water, while the average American uses four hundred to six hundred liters of water a day.
 - Every seven seconds, somewhere in the world a child under age five dies of hunger, while Americans throw away 14 percent of the food we purchase.
 - Nearly one billion people in the world live on less than one American dollar a day. Another 2.5 billion people in the world live on less than two American dollars a day.
 - More than half of the world lives on less than two dollars a day, while the average American teenager spends nearly \$150 a week.
 - Forty percent of people in the world lack basic sanitation, while forty-nine million diapers are used and thrown away in America *every day*.
 - 1.6 billion people in the world have no electricity.
 - Nearly one billion people in the world cannot read or sign their name.
 - Nearly one hundred million children are denied basic education.
 - By far, most of the people in the world do not own a car. One third of American families own three cars.
 - One in seven children worldwide (158 million) has to go to work every day just to survive.

³ Richard Horsley, *Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2003), 23-24.

⁴ For the sources of all statistics and an extended version of the historical facts, see:
<http://thepangeablog.com/articles/unpublished-papers/behind-lukes-gospel-the-roman-empire-during-the-time-of-jesus/>

- Americans spend more annually on trash bags than nearly half of the world does on all goods.⁵

After reading about the Roman Empire and then about the consumption habits of the USA, what thoughts come to your mind about our call as members of the Kingdom of God?

4. Read Amos 5.21-24, Matthew 6.24, & Acts 4.32-5.11. The narrative of Scripture, from creation until new creation, testifies to a consistent problem: *idolatry*. One of the greatest idols in the Bible and throughout history has been money. What do these passages teach us about idolatry in general and about the use of finances specifically?

5. In the world of Jesus and the early church, the Emperor cult was a way to tie the interests of the empire with the interests of religion. Caesar was worshipped as a god incarnate, which is probably why the early Jesus followers adopted the phrase “Jesus is Lord” - to say, “Caesar isn’t!” The church began as a movement of subversion to the interests of the empire of oppression. Could it be possible that the USA has done something similar, except that only now the religion of the empire is now Christianity? Discuss your experiences of the close relationship between God and country in America.



Assignment for the Week

This week, you are invited to look closely at the way that you consume various goods on a daily basis. What is one thing that you could reduce or cut out of your life completely in order to resist the consumerism of our US culture? This self-examination and self-restraint is called the spiritual discipline of simplicity.

Final Thoughts

During the era of Caesar Augustus, in the shadow of the vast Roman Empire, a different king would be born. This King did not use weapons to move forward his Kingdom agenda, but rather demonstrated that humility, love, and social justice are the means by which the world will

⁵ Rob Bell, *Jesus Wants to Save Christians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), pp. 122-123.

become a place of peace. May we choose to live as representatives of that Kingdom in the shadow of all forms of empire in our modern world.

Also, for a helpful resource to give you a guide for how your daily choices can be made more responsibly, with the rest of the global family in mind, purchase the inexpensive book: [The Better World Shopping Guide: Every Dollar Makes a Difference](#), by Ellis Jones.

Whose Kingdom, Which Lord?

Jesus & Nationalism

GIVE CAESAR WHAT'S HIS, BUT... (WEEK 3)

Augustus, and many who succeeded him, was honored as a god in the First Century. In fact, as we read in the previous week, he was honored through various forms of propaganda such as: poetry, inscriptions, statues, sacrifices, and coins bearing his image. Some such coins



also made claims to the divinity of the emperors. And it is to a question regarding some of these particular kinds of coins that I want to shift our attention for a moment. In Luke chapter 20 we read:

²⁰ Keeping a close watch on him, they sent spies, who pretended to be sincere. They hoped to catch Jesus in something he said so that they might hand him over to the power and authority of the governor. ²¹ So the spies questioned him: "Teacher, we know that you speak and teach what is right, and that you do not show partiality but teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. ²² Is it right for us to pay taxes to Caesar or not?"

²³ He saw through their duplicity and said to them, ²⁴ "Show me a denarius. Whose image and inscription are on it?"

"Caesar's," they replied.

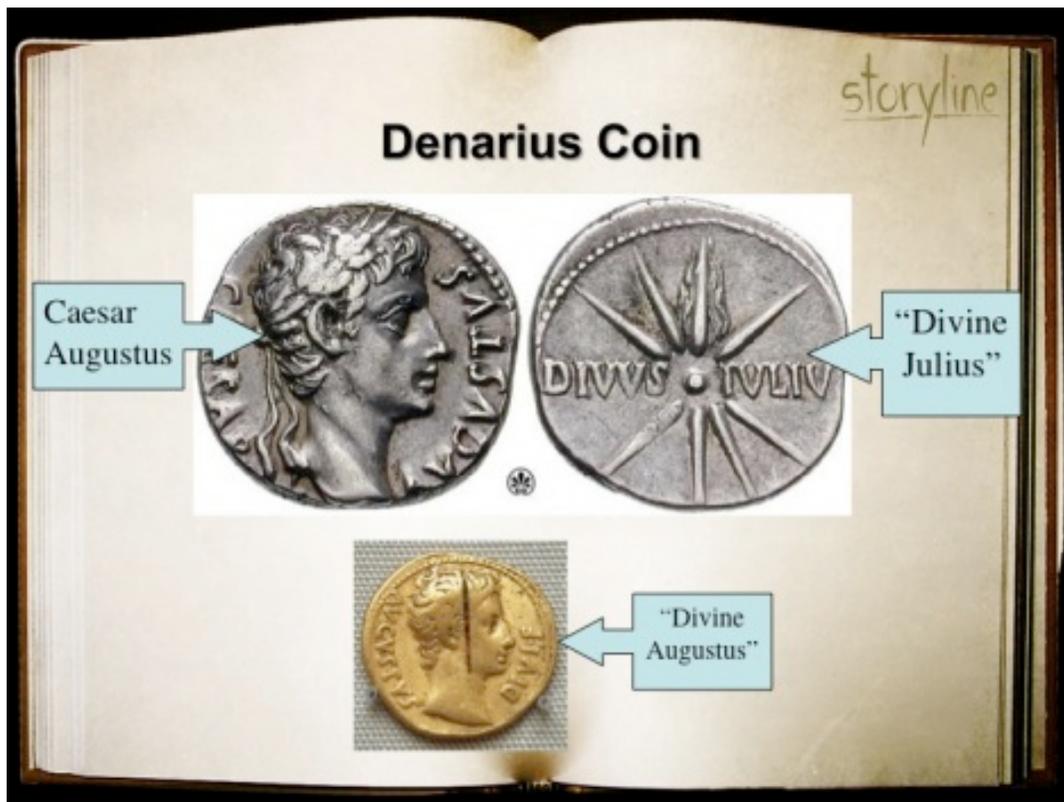
²⁵ He said to them, "Then give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's."

²⁶ They were unable to trap him in what he had said there in public. And astonished by his answer, they became silent. Luke 20.20-26

Here Jesus is confronted with one of the most direct political questions that we see addressed in the entire New Testament. Do the Israelites need to pay taxes to the Roman government that has set itself up as God? How will Jesus answer this question?

What is important to understand about this situation is that Jesus finds himself in a difficult situation. First of all, a strict observer of the Torah would not have even had the type of

coin required for the tax because it had an image of the Caesar on it. All such coins would have been considered to be a graven image. But, they were of the impoverished and dominated peoples of the Roman Empire (all with the exception of the Jewish elite who had compromised their standards by becoming in “cahoots” with Rome so to speak), so what option did they have? Jesus’ answer to “...give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s...” basically meant, as Joel Green has said: “Give to Caesar what is his already.” Because for Jesus, there was a greater issue at stake. We must give to “God what is God’s.”⁶



Many have assumed that this passage is an attempt by Jesus to split life into two spheres: the spiritual and the public. This would be a great mistake! This principle has been used to justify many things in the name of government and empire, especially war, because that kind of activity fits into the public/political box, not the spiritual one. But the passage here doesn't allow for any such thing. Such an idea would be completely foreign to someone hearing this

⁶ Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, ed. Gordon D. Fee, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), 716.

passage in the first century. But this does beg a question that we have not yet clarified: what exactly are the things that are God's?

If you remember the way the bible starts God's story, Genesis 1.26 sets up humanity as his true image bearer. If this is true, then Caesar's claims to allegiance are weak compared to the claim that God has on his image-bearers. And what are image-bearers to do? They are called to live in such a way that they reflect the love of God into the world, in such a unique way that it looks completely different than any nation ever could! Bearing God's image means that we are showing the world what God is like. Greg Boyd paraphrases this passage in the following way:

Why should we who bear the image of God fight over what to do with coins that bear the image of Caesar? The only thing we should worry about is giving God everything that bears his image—namely, our whole self.⁷

And when we do so, we will be demonstrating to the kingdoms of this world - the Caesars of this world - that only through Christ will this world be saved. Not through the power of the sword,

but through the power of the cross! Not through the threat of military might, but through peace.



After all, isn't it true that the kingdoms of this world have been handed over to the influence of Satan? Jump to Luke chapter four verse 6-7:

⁵ The devil led him up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. ⁶ And he said to him, "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. ⁷ If you worship me, it will all be yours."
Luke 4:5-7

Even the best political situations are under the influence of Satan. He has their authority. Even in the best of nations, like ours, the Devil is at work in governmental systems. He

⁷ Gregory A. Boyd, *The Myth of a Christian Religion: Losing Your Religion for the Beauty of a Revolution* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 26.

is at work when a liberal is in power; he is at work when a conservative is in power. So it seems that putting our hope in any country, even the United States in what you may consider its most ideal political scenario, is worthless for Satan is at work. Remember: we don't have to worry about the things that bear Caesar's image, but rather we must live as God's image-bearers to show our nation and every nation that the way of the cross is better than that of the sword. The way of Jesus is better because he is the true Lord of the world!

Questions For Reflection

1. What are your thoughts on the problem of dividing life into a public (political) and private (spiritual) sphere? Is it possible to carry out a political/public function (such as killing for the military, political office, etc.) and to keep that completely separate from your spiritual/personal life? What problems could come with this old dichotomy?
2. Jesus instructs his followers to pay their taxes. In American culture, this is something that has become a difficult issue for some who believe that their hard earned money is being stolen. Whatever your opinion may be on this matter, Jesus says not to raise a fuss about taxes. He would rather that we give back to the government the things that bear the images of the government, while keeping the only image that actually matter - our lives as the image of God! How does this interpretation of Jesus' words differ from what you may have heard in the past?
3. To 'bear God's image' means that we are charged with reflecting to the world what God is actually like. What kinds of reflections out we be? What actions and attitudes properly represent the Lord Jesus as opposed to the 'empires' of our world?
4. Read: Matthew 5.38-41 and John 18.36. Compare these to the passage we closed the reading with, Luke 4.5-7, which reminds us that all government is influenced by Satan. As we read, Caesar controlled the world with the constant threat of violence. How does God's kingdom



differ in this area? Are their ramifications for how the evangelical church is known for supporting various wars? If so, why and if not, why not?

5. The prophets of the Old Testament remind us that God calls nations to deal justly and to make special provisions for the most vulnerable in society (see Micah 5.8, Amos 5.21-24, Isaiah 58.6-9). At the same time, it is clear that Christians ought to be suspicious about the motives of the empire (in our case, the USA). How do we as Christians properly manage the tension between these two points? Would a helpful guiding question be to ask on all political matters: "What will alleviate the most suffering?" Rome got this question wrong, but perhaps the Church of the 21st century will be able to prophetically ask such a question of our homelands? What are your thoughts (political biases aside)?

Assignment for the Week

Pray that God would open your eyes to the suffering here in our own country as well as abroad. What can you do to bear God's image in a broken situation? Reflect on the idea of: What will alleviate the most suffering? (Relevant issues: war, foreign aid, health care, social programs, education, etc.)

Final Thoughts

This week's teaching could very easily be translated into some kind of extreme anti-government approach to politics. Truly, the church should never get too close to the political powers (when this happens you move from a Roman Empire to a HOLY Roman Empire that kills in the name of Jesus). Suspicion should always be in the back of our minds in our democratic and capitalistic US system or any other form that may come later. The risk however, is that we suspect so much that we also fail to remember that God has always called governments (Israel and secular) to do the work of social justice. When the systems in place are creating poverty, sickness, and any form of corruption, the church is called to be a prophetic voice against such. And, when foreign policy continues in the pattern of the Roman Empire, bearing the sword for interest based gain, the church is called to pray for and seek peace. All the while, the church must learn to be *the church!* We must become a community of love that shows the kingdoms of this age what a truly just and peaceful kingdom actually looks like. The people of God are invited to live sacrificially to seek the well being of all of those who suffer in our city, nation, and world. Then, and only then, will we be truly giving "to God what is God's."

Whose Kingdom, Which Lord?

Jesus & Nationalism

THE KING'S BIRTHDAY & THE COLLISION OF TWO EMPIRES (WEEK 4)



Earlier in this study we asked a question about if Caesar Augustus is important to the story that Luke is trying to tell us about Jesus' birth in chapter 2. What do we know based on verse 1 of this chapter? We know that the great Emperor has decreed that the whole world must be counted. This was an effort to make sure that the taxes could be taken with greater accuracy. For those in Judea, like the parents of Jesus, this was simply a reminder of the poverty and suffering of their people because of the Roman Empire.

And think about Caesar Augustus again. Remember the announcement about his birthday that we read earlier that dated to 9 BC? Lets look at it one last time and see if anything starts to come together for us about the first birthday of Jesus.

All the cities unanimously adopt the birthday of the divine Caesar as the new beginning of the year...the birthday of the god [Augustus] has been for the whole world the beginning of good news (*euangelion*) concerning him [therefore let a new era begin from his birth].

The birth of Augustus is considered to be a new era. His birth is one that changed the course of human history. He is born as a human, but is simultaneously a god on earth. His life is the beginning of “good news.” Lets keep reading.



...Who being sent to us and our descendants as Savior, has put an end to war and has set all things in order; and [whereas,] having become [god] manifest (*phaneis*), Caesar has fulfilled all the hopes of earlier times...

So, lets get this straight. Augustus is the long awaited “Savior” who has brought peace to the world by putting “an end to war.” So, if we put this all together we find that Augustus who claimed to be the “son of god” (as we discussed earlier) is the “savior” who brings “good news” of peace. Where have I heard that before? Jump to verse 10 of Luke 2:

But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you *good news* of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a *Savior*, who is the Messiah, the Lord... And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and *on earth peace...*” Luke 2.10-11, 13-14 (NRSV)

Everything that Augustus claimed of himself is turned upside down by a baby who is born in the midst of the Roman imperial machine! Jesus is the Savior, not Caesar! Jesus is the good

news, not Caesar! Jesus is the source of true peace; not through the threat of violence imposed by the sword, but through the humility of a baby who would humbly walk the road to the cross! Jesus is the world's true king and Caesar is a parody! As the Apostle Paul makes clear in his letter to the Philippians:

⁵ In your relationships with one another, have the same attitude of mind Christ Jesus had:

⁶ Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;

⁷ rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.

⁸ And being found in appearance as a human being, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!

⁹ Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name,

¹⁰ that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

¹¹ and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Philippians 2.5-11

The humble baby who chose to die on the Roman cross has been enthroned as the world's true Lord! Caesar wanted to be the lord and master of the whole earth, but couldn't come close to Christ. In a sense, when Paul says "Jesus Christ is Lord..." it is as though he were saying in the same breath "...and that means Caesar isn't!" Jesus is king, and notice what this passage reveals to us about nations of the world. People from every kingdom of this world will confess Jesus' lordship, not simply the nation that I happen to hold in high regard. That means that Americans, Iraqis, Afghanis, Indians, Asians, Capitalists, Socialists, Communists and every other "i-s-t" will be represented before the throne of Jesus. No nation, no political ideology, no political party will receive any kind of favoritism. All that will matter on that day is if we lived as "God's image bearers" and gave him back his due: our lives for his Kingdom.

Questions For Reflection

1. What stands out to you after reading about the parallels between Caesar's birthday announcement and Jesus' first birthday? Does this change the nature of the story that we tell at Christmas? What needs to change about this holiday?

2. In what ways does the USA remind you of the themes that Augustus claimed and Jesus subverted? What is the US's message of peace? How about its good news? Does our country ever attempt to function as the Savior in global affairs either in the past or currently?
3. Read Luke 22.24-30. How do you think that the values of the Kingdom of God are in conflict with the values of the USA? For some clues skim through the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7).

4. Read Acts 17.1-9. Remember, saying "Jesus Christ is Lord" is like saying "...and Caesar isn't" (Phil 2.11). What reputation did the earliest Christians have "all over the world?" Is the Christian message confrontational at times?



5. Reread Philippians 2.5-11. This is passage that demonstrates the kind of King Jesus is as opposed to the emperor who rather than humbling himself, exudes arrogance. This humble King will have a global Kingdom. It will be made up of every race, nationality, language, culture, and yes - even political ideology! What are the ramifications for being part of this kind of Kingdom? How does the global nature of it inform how we are to relate to our world as American Christians? Is there any political perspective that can be deemed "Christian?"

Assignment for the Week

Reflect on: What are the political ideals that I hold to that shape how I view the world? Are these views "Christian" or the product of my cultural American upbringing? Then, seek out someone who is a Christian but who grew up in another country to engage in a political conversation. You may be surprised to learn how their perspective differs from yours.

Final Thoughts

There has been a strong political presence in the USA that often claims to speak for Christianity. Yet, in Scripture it seems that only one politic and one Kingdom are proclaimed. This "nation" of God is made up of every culture throughout the world. Therefore, when we deal with global policy as American citizens, we need to also think about how such politics affect members of our primary Kingdom. Any US action that causes suffering to fellow Christian

sisters and brothers, needs to be reason for the church to call out the folly of such agendas. Our citizenship is in heaven and we sojourn in a land called the United States. When we reverse the order of these allegiances we risk carrying the sword of the empire instead of the cross of a crucified and resurrected Lord.

Whose Kingdom, Which Lord?

Jesus & Nationalism

THE KING'S BIRTHDAY & THE COLLISION OF TWO EMPIRES (WEEK 5)

So we now have come to the final week of this study on Jesus and nationalism. Let's end our journey where it began about a month ago with the picture of Jesus holding the constitution. Does the painting that puts Jesus in the center of our national identity help or harm the cause of the Kingdom of God? In my experience in *God and politics* conversations that I've had, many



people truly believe that God has divinely foreordained the form of government in America. I have heard people appeal to the Constitution and its amendments as though they are a moral supplement to the Bible. I have friends who have made comments to me on several occasions about how the right to bear arms is an expression of Christian

freedom. Or some will start a conversation on some kind of ethical issue by saying, "but the constitution says..." In other political circles, the conversations sometimes can become dangerous in that people can put all of their hope in government to solve the world's problems. But, as we have seen this study, the New Testament clearly is careful not to align the Church with any nation or political ideology. This is not to say that God doesn't want governments to preserve order and justice in societies, but we must understand that all human governments are his accommodation to our broken world; never a path to his ideal plan for the cosmos. When we place the cross and the flag too closely together or put Jesus with our Constitution (as the picture

we began with does) we are in danger of losing our unique identity as members of a Kingdom that is distinct from all other nations of the world. The beautiful, counter-cultural kingdom of God!

I want to close by giving you an extreme and yet true example of what can happen when we align our national interests with those of God. The following is a quote from a sermon entitled *Comforting the Soldiers*, Preached by Puritan Preacher Cotton Mathers, in 1642:

“We are the New Israel and the natives are the Canaanites, just as Jehovah commanded Israel to slaughter the Canaanites, so God is calling us, by Divine right, to take this land and to slaughter if necessary.”

When our Christian identity gets lost in the identity of a nationalistic agenda, the results are almost always the opposite of God’s will for our world. No nation is the “new Israel” except the nation that is by its very definition transnational: the church!



So, Whose Kingdom and Which Lord are we going to serve? Have we bought into the lie of Caesar? Have we believed that our American political agenda is parallel to God’s? May it never be! May we choose to bear God’s image by reflecting his Lordship over all the Caesars of

the world. May our politics and national identities, never get in the way of making King Jesus known. May we decide that any form of politics that gets in the way of that vision (whether liberal, conservative, or any other ideology this broken world comes up with), must be brought down to their knees to bow at the throne of Jesus Christ!



Questions For Reflection

1. What has been the most challenging thing you have learned during our five weeks of study and discussion? Will you have difficulty saying the Pledge of Allegiance or singing God Bless America during July 4th worship gatherings in the future?
2. Is there a sense in which the USA has acted as though it were the theological equivalent to the “new Israel?” How do you feel about presidents and leaders who have evoked biblical language and called the US a “city on a hill?” How might we Christians reclaim this language to be true of our faith communities? By doing so, would we remind the US government of their proper place in the order of things?
3. Read Philippians 3.17-21. Paul connects our heavenly citizenship with earthly physical resurrection. In other words, the reality of our citizenship will be made to bear in our world when Christ returns to renew the cosmos by bringing the heavenly new Jerusalem (God’s capital city) to rule all nations (see Rev. 21-22, Rom. 8.18-26, 1 Cor. 15). Imagine being a Christian in the First Century reading this letter. Caesar may have the power to destroy the body, but our King was brought back to life and so will all believers! How should the coming “new creation” and the hope of resurrection inform our political life in the present?
4. Read 1 Peter 2.11-17. To give you a bit of background, it helps to know that this text was written during a time when Christians were being persecuted and even killed for proclaiming Jesus as Lord (most likely by Nero). What does this passage teach us about how we are to live in light of a “pagan” governmental structure? How do we both “honor the emperor” and remind the “emperor” who the true Lord is and how He intends this world to operate? Imagine if Christians were not being punished for bad behavior (as Peter says) but rather were being punished for their proclamation of Jesus as King. It seems like this would expose the evils of empire and be an opportunity for the church to demonstrate how the Kingdom of God is a community of love and care for one another. How does the way we live in community together expose injustice?
5. Think of the rhetoric that was used in the story of Cotton Mathers. How does this serve as a warning for Christians today in any nation that links faith to its agenda?

Assignment for the Week

Do some research and find an organization that helps those outside of the privileged USA. How might you (with your small group) make a difference by using some of your combined resources?

Final Thoughts

My hope is that this has been an eye opening five weeks for your community of faith. This is in no way intended to be 'anti-American' but to illuminate our hearts and minds to the reality of empire in our day. We should be glad to live in the US as it truly is a great place to live, but we should also be quick to scrutinize our country when it acts contrary to the ethics of the Kingdom. For too long, evangelical Christians have made assumptions about the role of Christian faith in Americanism. We have and continue to run the risk of making our nation into an idol and legitimizing deeds of evil as "Christian." May we become convinced that what is good for America is not always good for the Kingdom of God. May we resist nationalism in all its forms. May we pledge our allegiance to the King of Kings, the Lord of all the earth, Messiah Jesus. And may we embrace our fellow citizens of our true nation which transcends any geographical borders.

Recommended Resources

JESUS AND NATIONALISM

Below I list several resources for those who would like to go deeper on this subject. It is not an exhaustive list, but a next step for your journey.

- [Gregory Boyd, The Myth of a Christian Nation](#)
- [Gregory Boyd, The Myth of a Christian Religion](#)
- [Shane Claiborne and Chris Haw, Jesus for President](#)
- [Brian Walsh & Sylvia Keesmaat, Colossians Remixed: Subverting the Empire](#)
- [The Justice Project \(edited by McLaren, Padilla, & Seeber\)](#)
- [Shane Claiborne, Irresistible Revolution](#)
- [Richard Stearns, Hole in our Gospel](#)
- [Brian McLaren, Everything Must Change](#)
- [Rob Bell & Don Golden, Jesus Wants to Save Christians](#)
- [Tony Campolo, Red Letter Christians](#)
- [Jim Wallis, The Great Awakening](#)
- [Joel Hunter, A New Kind of Conservative](#)
- [N.T. Wright, Paul: In Fresh Perspective](#)
- [Kurt Willems, Behind Luke's Gospel: The Roman Empire During the Time of Jesus](#)
- [Kurt Willems, An Echo in the Wilderness: Living the Story of the Kingdom](#)