

“The Empire of the Empty Shrine: American Imperialism and the Church”  
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We have been through this before. The first commandment prohibiting other gods is not a hypothetical prohibition, but is set against the backdrop of the flight from the Egyptian empire and its other gods, including the Pharaoh. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego no doubt illustrated the first commandment for Daniel in their refusal to worship the idols that the conquering Babylonians had erected. The first commandment resonated with the early Christians, who found themselves unable to serve the gods of the Roman Empire who demanded their worship.

However, the American empire, if it is an empire, is quite different from previous empires, for it explicitly sets up no other gods to worship, but offers, as Michael Novak says, an “empty shrine.” The intention of the founding fathers was to correct the mistakes of the past by establishing no religion. Each individual is to be free to choose to worship one god, many, or none at all. According to Novak, the shrine has been “swept clean” in democratic capitalism not out of indifference to transcendence, but out of reverence for it, and out of “respect for the diversity of human consciences.” Transcendence is preserved by the freedom of each individual to pursue the ends of his or her choice (Novak, *Spirit of Democratic Capitalism*, 54-5).

What I want to explore today is how the kind of emptiness and openness that lies at the heart of democratic capitalism has an unfortunate tendency to

lend itself to constant expansion, and therefore empire. I want to argue also that this emptiness and openness has a way of creating new forms of idolatry.

Despite the rhetoric of the empty shrine, in other words, the shrine in practice is not empty, but is filled with other gods.

I don't want to argue that empire is a *necessary* consequence of liberalism; there may be, as Jeffrey Stout argues, another more pragmatic strand of liberal democracy. In the age of a global and endless "war on terror," however, that is not the dominant strand of liberalism that we're dealing with. In the United States, liberalism has been wed with perfect consistency with corporate and state imperialism, and it is this strand that we need to examine.

I will begin by giving an analysis of what the American empire actually entails. Then I will lay out a theological critique of empire, and put forward a vision of how Christian should think about their primary political allegiance.

## **I. The reluctant empire**

In order for the United States to have an empire, it is crucial that it constantly deny that it has one. The very goal of the liberal democratic republic is to allow everyone to pursue his or her way of life, not to impose one way of life on others. One of the central organizing myths under which we live, therefore, is that American dominance on the world stage is not something America pursued, but was an obligation that arose because of the need to defend others. Andrew Bacevich calls this the myth of the reluctant superpower. Historian Ernest May has written, "Some nations achieve greatness; the United States had greatness

thrust upon it” (quoted in Bacevich, *American Empire*, 7). It was only to defeat totalitarianisms, first fascism and then communism, that the United States was built into a military superpower. After World War II, all we wanted to do was to come home. But the containment of communism forced us to take a more active role on the world stage. Since the fall of communism, terrorism has forced the U.S. to act to “rid the world of evil” as President Bush said on September 14, 2001. Bush’s response to the 9/11 attacks was typical of the master myth of the reluctant superpower. “This nation is peaceful, but fierce when stirred to anger. The conflict was begun on the timing and terms of others. It will end in a way, and at an hour, of our choosing” (National Security Strategy, III). In other words, we were just sitting here minding our own business when...

This is Americans’ preferred way of telling the story. Politicians, historians, the media, and the person in the street know this version of the twentieth century by heart. Telling the story this way does two somewhat contradictory things for us. First, it preserves our sense of virtue. The inherent modesty of our liberal political system is not belied but preserved in our supposed reluctance to use our awesome power. Second, the story keeps us from reexamining the status of the United States as world superpower. We did not choose it. It just happened, like an act of God. There must, therefore, be a strong element of providence in America’s preeminent position in the world at this juncture of history. And one must never second-guess providence. On the one hand, then, the story of the reluctant superpower preserves our sense of modesty. On the other hand, it elevates America’s superpower status to a part

in God's design for history. Ironically, then, our modesty and reluctance proves our God-given superiority.

The main problem with the "reluctant superpower" myth is that it is false. As Andrew Bacevich's book *American Empire* documents, it is simply not historically true to believe that the United States has only taken its place on the world stage as a response to external events. In fact, the United States has been on a clear expansionist course at least since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As Teddy Roosevelt said in 1899, "Of course, our whole national history has been one of expansion." (Bacevich, *Empire*, 7). Especially since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the United States has pressed, by military and other means, to create a favorable world climate for American economic growth. American cold war strategy was never driven solely by the need to contain communism, but was also driven by the imperative to open world markets to American commerce. Under recent presidents – especially Clinton -- the U.S. mantra has been the pursuit of "openness," that is, the lack of barriers to the free movement of money, people, and ideas across borders of all kinds. This policy is nothing new. As banker Charles A. Conant put it in 1898, "What matters is that the United States shall assert their right to free markets in all the old countries which are being opened to the surplus resources of the capitalistic countries and thereby given the benefits of modern civilization" (in Bacevich, *Empire*, 55).

In this quote we can see the intermingling of the two major justifications for the policy of "openness." The first is economic. As the United States became industrialized in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the sheer volume of goods produced far

outstripped the capacity of the domestic market to absorb them. The opening of foreign markets, by military force if necessary, became essential for the export of our surplus. Today, the logic is somewhat reversed. American superpower status supports an import economy, where our domestic comfort is maintained by importing (largely on credit) far more than we export – for example, oil from the Middle East and cheap domestic goods from China. Nevertheless, the underlying economic justification for worldwide American hegemony is the same: openness and free markets across the globe are thought sure to bring economic prosperity to the whole world, and especially to the country with the greatest strategic access, that is, the United States. Gene McCarragher quotes this gem from the New York Times' Thomas Friedman:

For globalization to work, America can't be afraid to act like the almighty superpower that it is. The hidden hand of the market will never work without a hidden fist. McDonald's cannot flourish without McDonnell-Douglas, the designer of the F-15, and the hidden fist that keeps the world safe for Silicon Valley's technology is called the United States Army, Air Force, Navy and Marine Corps.(in Avram, ed., *Anxious About Empire*, 111).

But ever greater openness, or “globalization,” is said not only to have economic benefits but social and political dividends as well. Here is the second major justification for American expansion, the “benefits of modern civilization” that Conant spoke of. Precisely because of the openness of America's political system -- the fact that the shrine is empty and each person is free to fill it with whatever he or she wants – America has discovered the secret of freedom and happiness for everyone. America is, as Colin Powell has said, the first “‘universal nation,’ offering to others a ‘model of what is possible.’” In this regard the United

States was called upon to be 'a place where people of every background and distinction can live in... the kind of peace and harmony that God meant for all His children'." George W. Bush has used even more explicitly messianic language: "The ideal of America is the hope of all mankind. That hope still lights the way. And the light shines in the darkness. And the darkness will not overcome it" (in Bacevich, *The New American Militarism*, 12). Because America's values are universal, they are able to be spread throughout the entire globe, and indeed we have an obligation to do so. Thus the call from Powell aide and State Department official Richard Haass for Americans to "re-conceive their global role from one of a traditional nation-state to an imperial power." This would, however, be an "informal" empire organized around American values, which would reduce the need to resort to American might (Bacevich, *Empire*, 219).

Let me point to two ironies in this coincidence of economic and idealistic rationales. First, universalism feeds a virulent particularism, which is flag-waving American nationalism. Precisely because we are the most universal, we stand apart from the crowd. Because we understand history, we are the exception to history, the Chosen Nation. Patriotic fervor not only justifies American adventures abroad but helps unite a class-divided country at home. In a liberal capitalist nation-state where there is no agreement on the ends of human life, the nation-state itself becomes the one agreed upon end. American patriotism helps us ignore the fact that the economic class with the most to lose from globalization -- the working class -- is the class doing the actual killing and dying. Patriotism unites us by getting us to ignore class divisions.

The second, related, irony is that American empire oscillates between idealism and selfishness. Not only is American self-interest equated with what is good for the world. We expect empire to entail no sacrifice on our part and no limits to our consumptive way of life. When Jimmy Carter called on Americans to respond to the energy crisis with more modest expectations and sacrifice, he was trounced by the more “optimistic” Ronald Reagan, who promised limitless abundance without sacrifice, through military means. Both the idealism and the selfishness can be derived from openness, the idea of limitless freedom for all.

What is important to notice at this point is that imperialism is not accidental to U.S. history, but is perfectly consistent with the very foundations of the American project: free market capitalism and liberal democracy.

First, capitalism is about growth and expansion; it is always searching for new markets. Second, the “openness” of liberalism helps fuel American exceptionalism and nationalism: because we are free to disagree about the ends of life, the only thing uniting us is this freedom to disagree. America itself is the only thing we can all agree is worth dying for. It is the fulfillment of Voltaire’s dictum: “I may not agree with what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it.” Ideally, however, the death is someone else’s, not my own. We are good at killing, not so good at martyrdom. As General Patton said, “No one ever won a war by dying for his country; he won it by making the other poor dumb bastard die for *his* country.” Finally, liberalism has a strong missionary streak. Since it seeks to impose no particular religion or God or tradition or way of life, it is universally applicable to all peoples around the world. And, given its

claims to have solved the problems of history – the conflicts that result from different people’s particularistic claims – there is a powerful missionary impulse in liberalism, an impulse to spread its blessings across the globe.

With the fall of communism, this missionary impulse has gotten more strident, for now it seems that history has rendered its definitive verdict in favor of liberal capitalism. As both Bill Clinton and Condoleezza Rice have declared, liberal capitalism has been revealed in the collapse of communism to be on the “right side of history.” History therefore imposes certain obligations upon us. As Madeline Albright remarked “we have our duty to be authors of history”; we have an obligation, in other words, to make sure that the right side of history comes out on top through the spread of openness through globalization (Bacevich, *Empire*, 32-4).

One might think that, with the vanquishing of communism, the long promised peace of “openness” would have arrived. Now, however, we are being told that openness makes the world *more* dangerous. As Bill Clinton said, “The very openness of our borders and technology also makes us vulnerable in new ways” (in Bacevich, *Empire*, 118). The enemy has not disappeared, but has fragmented into decentralized networks of resistance that can cross borders more easily than our Cold War enemies could. In the age of globalization, the concept of “national defense” has been dropped in favor of “national security,” such that virtually any problem around the world – trade issues, oil supply, terrorism, drug cartels, human rights violations, and so on – can become a threat to the national security of the U.S. At the precise moment when peace was to

have arrived through the triumph of openness over communism, we are now being told that openness itself has heightened the threat to peace from those who continue to resist joining the right side of history (Bacevich, *Empire*, 117-22).

Do U.S. elites then draw the obvious conclusion that the strategy of openness is itself a threat to peace, and seek to curb the aggressive promotion of openness around the world? Of course not. Peace, we are told, is just around the corner, as long as we continue to promote ever greater openness. And the only way to do so, in an era in which our enemies are so decentralized, is to pursue ever greater expansion of military power, what the Pentagon's *Joint Vision 2010* calls "Full Spectrum Dominance." By some reckonings, U.S. military spending exceeds the military spending of all other nations combined. By fully exploiting surveillance and weapons technologies, the Pentagon believes we should be able to overcome any conceivable combination of adversaries, in conventional wars, unconventional wars, and "those ambiguous situations residing between peace and war." According to former Defense Secretary William Cohen, "Technology now gives the United States an opportunity that no other military has ever had: the ability to see through the fog of war" (in Bacevich, *Empire*, 133). Omniscience and omnipotence are now within our grasp. This confidence is expressed in Pentagon codenames "Infinite Reach" and "Infinite Justice" for two recent military operations. As General Tommy Franks has said, the new technology gives U.S. military commanders "the kind of Olympian perspective that Homer had given his gods" (in Bacevich, *Militarism*, 22).

Here we come to the theological heart of the imperial project. Empire is perhaps best understood as an attempt to see and act as God sees and acts. Empire is based in a claim of universality, the claim to be able to stand above all the messy particularities of the world's peoples and cultures, to see them not as Kurds and Cajuns and Pashtuns and Galicians and Navajos and Igbos and Scotsmen but as human beings, all with the same ultimate aspiration. In philosophical terms, this project has affinities with the Platonic desire to ascend beyond the mortality and particularities of this world. I'll say more about the false theology of this vision in the next section. But first I want to review where we've come and how we got here. We began with the American political system's claim to modesty: the public shrine has been emptied of any one particular God or creed, so that the government can never claim divine sanction and each person may be free to worship as she sees fit. We then saw how the very emptiness of the shrine makes it transferable to any people on earth. We have unlocked the universal secret to freedom, prosperity, and peace and are obliged to share it with the world. But because we pursue a world without borders, potential enemies are everywhere, and so we fill the shrine again, with a national god who is capable of seeing all resistance to openness and raining down death upon it.

## **II. Theological critique of empire**

Now let us return to the Decalogue and see what light our theological tradition can shed on the American empire. I want to examine three passages

from the Exodus account of the covenant on Sinai and see how they can be seen to critique the American idea of empire.

Exodus 19:5-6

“Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.”

Here we have a statement of both universalism and particularity. The whole earth is encompassed in God’s plan of salvation, and yet the covenant is made between God and a single people. God does not view the people of the world as generically equivalent, but chooses to save the world through the particular history of one people, Israel. The particularity of Israel will never be effaced by a generic universalism, precisely because the shrine is never truly empty. The God of Israel, who is the God of all, is not a generic god, but is the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses.

It is important to note that the language of priesthood and holiness, kingdom and nation --which we would divide into “religious” and “political” categories --are all used for Israel. Israel is not simply a religious body. The Law given at Sinai is not “religious” law, but covers every aspect of life, from governance to birds’ nests.

There is an influential kind of American exceptionalism that applies the logic of universal salvation through one particular people to the United States. The U. S. is the new Israel, the providential fulfillment of a universal act of temporal salvation through one particular Chosen Nation. The problem with this

is that the New Testament identifies Israel with the church, not with any race or nation. As Paul makes clear in Romans 9-11, those Gentiles who believe in Christ are grafted onto Israel. As I Peter 2:9 says, echoing Ex. 19:6, it is the church that is a “chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.” The church is thus universal in that it calls people of all races and nations, but it is particular in that it calls them into a different sort of discipline that makes them distinct from any worldly political body. Those who stand in the “marvelous light” of Christ no longer fit easily into any earthly nation, but have become citizens of heaven.

The early church understood itself as more than a purely religious body, adopting the term *ekklesia* to denote the peculiar political status of the people of God. The *ekklesia* was the “assembly” of all those with citizen rights in a Greek city-state. The church’s use of the term *ekklesia* may have its ultimate roots in the Deuteronomic phrase “the day of the assembly” at Sinai (Deut. 9:10, 10:4, 18:16). In adopting the term *ekklesia*, the church was making a claim to being more than a mere club. The church was not just a part of a whole but was itself a whole, whose interests were not particular but catholic; they embraced the fate of the entire world. The church saw itself as the eschatological fulfillment of Israel, and therefore as the witness and embodiment of salvation to the world. The church was not *polis*, and yet it used the language of the kingdom of God to describe the very concrete and visible fulfillment of Israel that was “at hand” in the event of Jesus Christ (Mk. 1:15). The church was not *polis*, and yet it used

the language of citizenship to describe membership in it (Eph. 2:19; Phil. 3:20). For this reason, Christians were viewed with suspicion by the Romans, because their loyalty to Christ cut against their loyalty to any imperial project. In other words, Christians were not questionable citizens of the empire simply because the Romans explicitly worshipped other gods. Christians are questionable citizens of *any* empire or nation-state, because their primary political loyalty belongs to the Body of Christ, the church.

#### Exodus 20:2-6

“I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.”

If it is the case that the empty shrine has been surreptitiously filled by a national god, then the first commandment against other gods is clearly breached. What makes the American case so much more difficult than that of the Roman Empire, however, is that there is no single visible idol, no golden calf, to make the idolatry obvious. We can of course point to the flag and other national symbols as focal points of devotion, but officially the shrine remains empty. Americans pledge allegiance to a nation “under God,” not in God’s place. “Openness” is not a very good candidate for idolatry; there is nothing to be “in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the

earth.” As Carolyn Marvin suggests, however, it is the very invisibility and ineffability of the national god that makes it so powerful.

To concede that nationalism is a religion is to expose it to challenge, to make it just the same as sectarian religion. By explicitly denying that our national symbols and duties are sacred, we shield them from competition with sectarian symbols. In so doing, we embrace the ancient command not to speak the sacred, ineffable name of god. The god is inexpressible, unsayable, unknowable, beyond language. But that god may not be refused when it calls for sacrifice. (Marvin and Ingle, “Blood Sacrifice and the Nation,” JAAR, Winter 1996, 768).

The empty shrine becomes the new Holy of Holies, empty after the Babylonian Exile but still signifying the unapproachable power of God. The myth of the reluctant superpower, however, ensures that the name of the divinity not be spoken.

There is a problem in this critique of American empire, however, for we have said both that the United States acts as a substitute church and that it acts as a substitute god. This would not pose a problem for Marvin, however, coming as she does from the perspective of sociologist Emile Durkheim. For Durkheim’s key insight was that religion is essentially a social group’s worship of itself. Religion, in other words, is the way that a society represents itself to itself, and thereby maintains its identity and unity. All religion is civil religion. From the point of view of the Decalogue, a Christian would say that religion is nothing more than the group’s self-worship *if* the one true God is not acknowledged. The very way the Decalogue is ordered indicates that only if God is acknowledged as the source of the community will the community be able to refrain from killing, adultery, stealing, and the rest. The empty shrine, however, threatens to make a deity not out of God but out of our freedom to worship God.

Our freedom comes to occupy the empty shrine. Worship becomes worship of our collective self, and civil religion tends to marginalize the worship of the true God. Our freedom, finally, becomes the one thing we will die and kill for.

### Exodus 20:13

“You shall not kill”

Where the godlike pretensions of the Empire come most closely into focus is in the increasing willingness and capacity to use military force anywhere in the world. As Marvin says, “The first principle of every religious system is that only the deity may kill. The state, which does kill, allows whoever accepts these terms to exist, to pursue their own beliefs and call themselves what they like in the process” (Marvin and Ingle, *Blood Sacrifice and the Nation*, 10). In other words, a basic principle of American openness is that you may confess on your lips any god you like, provided you are willing to kill for America.

If we look at the commandment against killing, we see how closely linked it is to the first commandment. Many are puzzled by the seeming contradiction between “You shall not kill” and the subsequent details on putting offenders to death in Exodus and beyond. Some would like to translate the commandment “You shall not murder,” but the root verb *ratsach* is used elsewhere in the Old Testament to refer to unintentional killing. The key to the commandment is in the subject, not the verb. “*You* shall not kill, because *I* am the Lord your God.” Killing belongs to God, not to us. The fifth commandment, just like the first, establishes an absolute divide between God and humans. You shall not kill for

the very same reason that you shall not worship any other gods: because there is only one God who is sovereign over life and death. The prohibition against idols reaffirms the absolute divide between Creator and created. Indeed, the whole structure of the Decalogue supports paying more attention to the subject than to the verb. The first table is about the subject of the Law, its giver. Only after it is established what is due to God does the second table spell out what humans owe to each other. When we hear the expression “shock and awe” we should think not of the Pentagon’s name for the first phase of the war in Iraq, but of the Israelites at the foot of Mt. Sinai, trembling at the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the smoking mountain (Ex. 20:18).

The commandment against killing has everything to do with the way that history is told. If we have replaced God as “authors of history,” in Madeline Albright’s phrase, then clearly the commandment against killing no longer applies to us. It is our responsibility to make sure, by violent means if necessary, that history follow the course that has been revealed to us as the right one. As scripture scholar Gerhard Lohfink tells it, on the other hand, God’s very election to work universal salvation through one particular people, Israel, is based in the absence of coercion.

[H]ow can anyone change the world and society at its roots without taking away freedom? It can only be that God begins in a small way, at one single place in the world. There must be a place, visible, tangible, where the salvation of the world can begin: that is, where the world becomes what it is supposed to be according to God’s plan. Beginning at that place, the new thing can spread abroad, but not through persuasion, not through indoctrination, not through violence. Everyone must have the opportunity to come and see. All must have the chance to behold and test this new thing. Then, if they want to, they can allow themselves to be drawn into the history of salvation that God is creating... What drives them to the new thing cannot

be force, not even moral pressure, but only the fascination of a world that is changed (Lohfink, *Does God Need the Church*, 27).

This peaceful beginning seems contradicted by God's destruction of the Pharaoh's armies in Exodus, but the point, as Moses says in 14:14 is that "The LORD will fight for you, and you have only to keep still." The conviction that it is God who fights, and not the Israelites, is essentially the same even when the Israelites take up the sword. When the Israelites defeat the Amalekites in Exodus 17, their victory is not attributed to the skill of the Israelite warriors but to the intervention of the LORD. Israel only prevails when Moses holds the "staff of God" aloft; Amalek prevails when the staff is lowered.

Of course, every army believes that its victories are due to divine favor. In the Old Testament, however, one of the concrete signs of God's favor is a *lack of military strength and preparation*. Indeed, the emphasis is often on the military weakness of Israel. In I Kings 20:27, the Israelites were encamped "like two little flocks of goats, while the Arameans filled the country." Nevertheless, the LORD assured their victory. In II Kings 6 and 7, the huge army of Arameans that had surrounded the Israelites is put to flight when the LORD makes the Arameans hear the sound of a large army that did not in fact exist. Conversely, military misfortune is invariably explained by Israelite reliance on weapons and preparation, and its refusal to rely on the LORD. In II Chronicles, for example, the alliance of King Asa of Judah with King Ben-hadad of Aram against the Northern Kingdom is condemned by the seer Hanani in the following terms:

Because you relied on the king of Aram, and did not rely on the LORD your God, the army of the king of Aram has escaped you. Were not the Ethiopians

and the Libyans a huge army with exceedingly many chariots and cavalry? Yet because you relied on the LORD, he gave them into your hand. For the eyes of the LORD range throughout the entire earth, to strengthen those whose heart is true to him. You have done foolishly in this; for from now on you will have wars (II Chron. 15:7-9).

This motif is common in the prophetic literature. As Isaiah has it, "Alas for those who go down to Egypt for help and who rely on horses, who trust in chariots because they are many and in horsemen because they are very strong, but do not look to the Holy One of Israel or consult the LORD!" (Is. 31:1). Even where war is countenanced in the Old Testament, then, putting trust in weapons and military preparation is condemned as idolatrous. And war is only fought in response to the direct will of Israel's God, not to defend the freedom of the human will.

In the New Testament, Christians believe, God's design for history is brought to fruition in Jesus Christ. Here the idea that humans can enforce the verdicts of history through force of arms dies on the Cross. The Old Testament idea that Israel is preserved by not by military strength and preparedness, but through the miraculous hand of God, served as a paradigm for the early church of how the Kingdom of God would be inaugurated not by military means, but solely by the worthiness of the slaughtered Lamb (Rev. 5:12). Martyrdom becomes the paradigmatic way of discerning the will of God in history. Those who have eyes to see and ears to hear discern God's activity not in military might, but in persecution and weakness. Jesus Christ has absorbed the violence

of the world on the cross, and has not given the violence back. The church imitates Christ by absorbing the violence of the world, by taking up the cross and following Jesus. This is the message to the readers of the Gospel of Mark, for example. "From the way the empire persecutes you, it may not look like God has triumphed in Christ. From your point of view, the kingdom still looks as small as a mustard seed, but you must know that you are on the right side of history, and the kingdom of God will grow, not by taking up arms, but by taking up the cross of Christ."

If God is in charge of history, then the rise of the United States to worldwide dominance must have a part to play in God's providential movement of history. Determining which part, however, is far from easy. Discerning the right side of history is not a simple matter of seeing who is "winning" at any particular moment in history. If, as Christians believe, Jesus Christ is the key to history, then history must be read from the point of view of Jesus' incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection. The God who is born in a barn interrupts history, and inverts it. God's *kenosis* or self-emptying in Christ (Phil. 2:7) is the inversion of the Platonic aspiration to escape the particular. Our God is not a god of empire who ascends to Olympian heights, but rather is a God who descends, who is incarnated in all the messy particularity of a poor Jew in 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine. The Gospel invites us not to conquer mortality through superior surveillance and force, but to find true life by refusing to fear death, to fall into the ground like a grain of wheat and die, in order to bear fruit (Jn. 12:24).

#### IV. Conclusion

We are called, then, to reclaim our loyalty to Christ and to see the church as our primary political community. To say this, however, is not to engage in prideful triumphalism on behalf of the church. Indeed, it is a call for repentance for the many failures of the church to be what it is in the eyes of God. The idea of the United States as the new Israel, as the bringer of salvation to the world, is so plausible to many because the American empire has taken over many of the functions of the church catholic. In the early church, citizenship was available through baptism to those excluded from such status in the *polis*, namely women, children, and slaves. Today, the church is racially segregated, while American liberalism, in theory anyway, is colorblind. The church is divided into national denominations, while the American empire aspires to worldwide catholicity. The church has lost much of its missionary zeal, while America seeks to “go and make disciples of all nations” (Mt. 28:19). American imperialism reads history as an unfolding of salvific purpose and liberation, whereas the church has largely confined salvation to a personal and individual matter. It is not an accident that so many strategists and apologists of empire are Jews and Christians steeped in the biblical tradition. They seek to fulfill the universal aspiration to salvation through America, in part because the church has neglected that work and been absorbed by the nation.

The church must recover its prophetic voice, but it cannot be merely negative. If the church is going to call people away from idolatry and remind them of their primary allegiance to Christ, then it will have to do more than to rail

against the illusions of freedom enforced by coercion. The church will have to tell a more persuasive story of liberation than that told by the Empire. It will have to tell a more difficult and complex story of liberation through obedience to God's will, not to the human will. It will have to tell a story of the conquest of violence not by inflicting more violence, but by absorbing it. And it will have to tell this story of liberation not just in words, but in witness. The boldness of the imperial project must be met by the boldness of Pentecost. The only way to recover that boldness is to worship in the Holy Spirit at the shrine that is not empty, but full of the presence of the one true God, the God of Moses and of Jesus.