



Good News for the Pews

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The Changing Church

by Pastor Don

I've been doing some thinking. When I was up at Zephyr Point in mid-July, as a teacher for the Art of Transitional Ministry (what used to be called Interim Training). I listened to about thirty Presbyterian, Lutheran, and Methodist pastors talk about their faith communities and some of the common things progressive churches are facing. I began to sketch out an analysis for our current era in the life of the church. The contemporary landscape of American religion, marked by the rise of Christian Nationalism, bears striking resemblances to historical religious and political movements. I want to explore some parallels between Pharisaical Judaism--the Pharisees, Priests and Scribes and King Herod's rule, the 4th and 5th century Roman Empire when Constantine declared Christianity the official religion, and the current rise of Christian Nationalism. This is only a kind of mental sketch that I'm thinking about, and I would like to share some thoughts before I leave for vacation.

Pharisaical Judaism, a religious movement within Second Temple Judaism, which was at its height during the life of Jesus, emphasized strict adherence to the Law and ritual purity. While it originated as a pious response to foreign Greek and Roman influence in Judea, it evolved into a rigid, legalistic system. This legalism, combined with a sense of superiority, alienated many Jews and ultimately contributed to the fracturing of Jewish society. The Pharisees' emphasis on external conformity over internal spiritual transformation echoes the "righteousness based" teaching often associated with certain strands of conservative or Evangelical Christianity.

The 4th and 5th century Roman Empire witnessed the Christianization of the Roman state. While Constantine's Edict of Milan granted religious tolerance, subsequent emperors transformed Christianity into the official state religion. This conflation of Church and State led to a politicization of faith, as religious leaders sought to influence imperial policies. The allure of power and privilege corrupted the Church, leading to a decline in spiritual vitality. Similarly, Christian Nationalism seeks to establish a Christian theocracy in the United States, blurring the lines between religious and political authority.

Both Pharisaical Judaism and the Christian Roman Empire were characterized by a sense of exclusivity and intolerance. The Pharisees viewed themselves as the sole custodians of true religion, while the Christian Roman Empire persecuted pagans and so-called "heretics;" basically anyone who didn't toe the lines of orthodoxy. Christian Nationalism, too, exhibits a similar spirit of exclusion, often demonizing marginalized groups and promoting a narrow, monolithic vision

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