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Bp John Stowe

Bishop John Stowe of Lexington delivers a keynote address at the annual assembly of the Kentucky Council of Churches, which was held Oct. 17 at First United Methodist Church in Frankfort, Kentucky. (NCR screenshot/Facebook/The Kentucky Council of Churches)



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Christian nationalism is a distortion of the religion from which it takes its name, and it can only be defeated by love, Catholic Bishop John Stowe of Lexington, Kentucky, told a statewide ecumenical gathering in Frankfort.

"If we believe that God is love, then Christian nationalism must be the oxymoron of oxymorons," Stowe said Oct. 17 in a [keynote address](#) at the annual assembly of the [Kentucky Council of Churches](#), which represents 12 major Christian traditions.

Christianity is a religion of love, not fear, Stowe said. "We cannot give into fear. We have to respond with love, as hard as that is."

Stowe said he was concerned about how to "bear witness in a time of a counterwitness."

"How do we speak truth in love at a time when Christ — a name so dear to us — is being distorted and becomes an adjective to describe nationalism?" he asked.

Kentucky Gov. Andy Beshear, a Democrat, also [addressed](#) the assembly, saying he tried to live by the commandment to "love my neighbor as myself."

Stowe did not mince words in describing the dangers of Christian nationalism, including quoting from Project 2025, the 900-page document created by the Heritage Foundation and allies of Donald Trump as a blueprint for a potential next Trump administration. The plan calls for dismantling the "administrative state," expanding presidential power and imposing an ultraconservative social vision.

Stowe said he was "concerned" that the Catholic Church and other churches do not seem to be taking the threat of Christian nationalism seriously.

"I belong to a church that does not engage in partisan politics. In this election, as in others, that involves a lot of tiptoeing and a lot of walking on eggshells," he said.

But Stowe said he would not be walking on eggshells in this speech, "because only one political party in the United States has put forth a candidate who endorses, embraces and spouts the language of Christian nationalism."

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Christian nationalists are a minority, although a "significant minority" in Christian churches in the U.S. and increasingly abroad, Stowe said, noting that in Catholicism, integralists propose that "the one true religion, ours, should have the right to control government."

The Christian nationalist movement appeals to those with a nostalgic view of Christian history and an "indignity at the godlessness of present-day society," he said.

Stowe said he, too, was concerned about secularization, but that forced conversions and violence were not the solution.

Although neither party fully embraces the Christian message of humility described in [Philippians 2](#), Christian nationalists cloak an anti-Christian, racist worldview in religious language, he said.

"So the basic command of 'Love your neighbor as yourself,' becomes 'Love your own kind,' " he added.

Any nationalism, he said, is the "opposite of healthy patriotism."

"Nationalism, like fascism, requires an enemy to survive," he said, and too often Muslims, nonwhite Christians, Jews, gays, transgendered persons or "anyone who is different or outside the mainstream" suffer.

"In this Christian nationalist worldview, other nations — even Christian ones — are a threat," he said. "To promote Christian nationalism requires that people live in fear, not only for the desire of what might have been but in a fear for what is coming."

Nationalism also tends to create "secular messiahs," he said.

It also is connected to white supremacy, according to Stowe. "White Christian nationalists are trying to impose a supersessionist version of religion with a reactionary legislative agenda supported by one political party. I don't have to name it," he said.

Stowe has been [outspoken](#) on issues of peace, environmental justice, women's issues and inclusion of LGBTQ people.

He called upon the Kentucky Council of Churches to be prepared to respond to Christian nationalism, reminding them it will not disappear after the election, no matter the outcome.

"It's hard to preach in the midst of this reality," he said. "We're afraid to say anything political. But remember, what's the opposite of resolving our differences politically? Violence, and might makes right. So of course, we want to resolve things politically."

"We have to engage," he said. "We can't abdicate our voice or responsibility."

This story appears in the **Election 2024** feature series. [View the full series.](#)