Chris Peterson, in which they attested to their shared values and promised to support the election's outcome. As chair of the National Governors Association in 2023, he launched a national initiative aimed at using governors' bully pulpits and convening power to encourage healthier disagreement.

"It's an unbelievably strong headwind," he told me, when I asked about governing in today's climate. Speaking of politics and media, he said: "The misalignment of incentives within those worlds, the algorithms and outrage cycles with social media and cable news, is incredibly degrading. It's destroying hope."

Then he turned to religion and the social connections it fosters. As people disaffiliate from faith, he said, "far too often we're replacing those connections with politics. Politics becomes our religion in many cases, and that harms our community and our souls. It makes governing inclusively much more difficult. My job would be so much easier if I woke up every morning and did whatever Fox News says that day."

That is the connection I missed two decades ago. Like it or not, the church's crisis is not only the church's business; it is Governor Cox's business, and indeed *my* business. Whether Christianity upholds its bargain with God is for God, not me, to say; but at present, as Americans abandon it in droves, it does not seem able to uphold its bargain with democracy.

We need to ask why. Is secular liberalism destroying religion, as liberalism's critics maintain? Does liberalism inevitably dissolve transcendent values in what Brink Lindsey calls an "acid bath of romantic hyper-individualism"?

Not all Christian voices think so. Recall what Russell Moore said in 2016: "The church must stand against the way politics has become a religion, and religion has become politics." And notice the subject of his sentence: *the church* must stand. Instead, it took a different direction.

2

Sharp Christianity

The Church of Fear

"Flight 93" evangelicalism betrays the church and the Constitution

Still bleary-eyed one morning in a hotel restaurant, I plop my breakfast plate down at a random table and strike up a conversation with the stranger sitting next to me. Since I am attending a conference on religion and civic life, I'm not surprised when he introduces himself as an evangelical pastor. I'll call him Mark. His church is Baptist, located in an oil town in west Texas. His congregants number about a hundred. Eighty percent are white, though the surrounding community is mostly Hispanic. "I love these people," he says of his parishioners. Yet when I ask if he has considered quitting the pastorate within the past year, he replies without hesitation. "*Absolutely.*"

Why? He uses a phrase which comes up several times in our conversation: *battlefield mindset.* His parishioners take an aggressive tone, one which reflects anger, fear: *Christianity is under attack and we have to do something about it.* They bring to church the divisive cultural issues they hear about on Fox News, such as critical race theory—even though, he tells me, many don't understand what that is.

And politics creeps in—not partisan campaigning as such, but a politicized, us-or-them worldview. "It's like talking to a wall with some people," Mark tells me, "because the Gospel is seen as political." The battlefield mindset is not new, but the 2016 presidential race and its aftermath "amped it up." Mark is worn down from hearing his white parishioners lament the loss of their country, so much so that he seeks out the company of his Hispanic friends outside church "because of what I *don't* have to talk about."

Will he continue in the pulpit? He takes it one day at a time. "I'm trusting God," he says. "There's a church within the church that really wants to follow Jesus." They're a minority, yet a reason to stay. "The gains are minimal, but you see them. But it's slow work."

Sixteen hundred miles from Pastor Mark, in the Washington, D.C., suburbs, Wayne (also not his real name), the pastor of an evangelical Presbyterian church, exhaustedly tells me he almost quit four times in recent years. "Theological belief has become a small factor in why people pick a church," he says. "People got more in love with their lifestyle than their faith." About ten years ago, he started to be bothered by a "snarkiness" and an "almost Nietzschean ethic" among his parishioners. "All of the stuff that has come to the fore was there but incipient"—and then the Trump phenomenon "turbocharged" it, roiling and dividing the congregation. "For our church, in the end, the center held," he says. But will comity survive the next political season? He shrugs. No way to know.

When I ask what the last few years have taught him, he replies, "I think we've learned that our congregation wasn't as spiritually mature as we thought it was." He frets about what he calls *spiritual rot.* I prod him: can't he, as pastor, do something about that? Isn't it his job to guide his flock spiritually?

"I can't make them want it," he sighs, with evident weariness. "That's the biggest challenge."

In rural North Carolina, a Baptist pastor tells me that fear and intolerance haunt his congregation, narrowing the range of acceptable belief. "In my opinion," he tells me, "the Baptist Faith and Message has become more like a noose. It's something that pastors have always faced, but I think it has become sharper in the last 20 years, and certainly within the last ten, and certainly after the election of Donald Trump. Trump spoke to some fears and incited fears. And when we're afraid, we don't always reach out in the most kind and loving ways." He tries to lead his congregation toward Jesus's capacious, forgiving message, but "I'm hired by a vote of the people and I'm fired by a vote, and there's no hierarchy to protect me from that. If congregants want a pastor to be removed, that's going to happen."

One can reproduce these conversations with pastors throughout the country. The words vary, but the tune is the same. Christian witness is in trouble in white evangelical America. And the biggest challenge is not from the secular world; it is sitting in the pews.

In Chapter 1, I spoke of the decline of white Christianity in America, both in numbers and in the church's loss of differentiation from the secular world outside—what I dubbed Christianity's cultural trade deficit. I explained why the "thinning" of Christianity is a hazard for democracy as well as a crisis for the church. I argued that secular society and religion are inherently and existentially interdependent; there is no secular substitute for the meaning and moral grounding which religious life provides. Yet Thin Christianity fails to provide the spiritual and communal anchors people need. I expressed alarm that Christianity seems less and less able, and less will-

ing, to keep up its end of an implicit bargain with liberal democracy. And I argued that while church and state in America should not be allies as such, they must be to some significant extent aligned, or both will suffer.

In this chapter, I drill down into a central cause of today's misalignment, which I call Sharp Christianity: a divisive, fearful, partisan, and un-Christlike version of Christianity with dangerously illiberal implications. Although Sharp Christianity has many sources, including historical accident, demographic change, and challenges from the secular world, we should understand it, first and foremost, as a *choice* made by Christians—a catastrophic choice, because it corrodes not only democracy but also Christianity itself.

Before considering that thesis, though, we should take notice of its antithesis, which boasts a lot of followers and wins more every day.

Is Liberalism to Blame?

A loose constellation of ideas often called *post-liberalism* puts the shoe on the other foot, maintaining that Christianity and liberal democracy are indeed pulling apart, but Christians are not to blame. Rather, secular liberalism forced their hand; aggressive secularism relentlessly attacks and undermines Christian communities and other adherents of traditional values while also undermining democracy.

Liberalism is a broad church, with all kinds of variants and offshoots, and it offers many aspects for nuanced criticism. Unfortunately, post-liberalism is not generally interested in nuanced criticism. It paints with a broad brush, condemning the entire liberal tradition in sweeping terms. (In my crosser moods, I think of it as Blame Liberalism First.) Although post-liberalism has its own diversity of ideas and proponents, its

anchoring premise is that liberalism is inherently self-undermining because it cannot help but destroy the institutions and norms it depends on—among them, religion, faith, and the communal, traditional values which religion and faith sustain. The culprit is alleged to be an all-pervasive cult of individualism, a "me first" ideology which valorizes unbounded self-creation, personal liberty, cosmopolitanism, and consumption. One version of the case is summarized by Brink Lindsey of the Niskanen Center (who is a friendly critic of liberalism, not a post-liberal) in *The Permanent Problem,* his Substack blog:

> As America achieved mass affluence in the middle of the twentieth century, the romantic individualism of consumerism had become pervasive, and the percentage of people exposed to "highbrow" culture rose with the boom in college education. Conditions were ripe for Bohemia to become a mass phenomenon. Enter the 1960s, and the eruption of a youth rebellion—a "counterculture" that envisioned the coming of a bohemian millennium. . . . Anarcho-paradise never arrived, of course, and the extravagance of the antinomianism subsided. But the deep-seated hostility to authority and hierarchy of any kind, the tendency to regard established institutions as oppressive and illegitimate—that never went away.
>
> The acid bath of romantic hyper-individualism has degraded all the connections of contemporary society—connections to one's family, to all the major secular institutions, to the land of one's birth, all the way to the shared sense of the sacred.

In his 2023 book *Freethinking: Protecting Freedom of Thought Amidst the New Battle for the Mind,* Simon McCarthy-Jones

(also not a post-liberal) provides a concise summary of the post-liberal case:

> Post-liberal thinkers argue that liberalism is driven by the master value of autonomy. In such a society, freedom is the absence of any restraints. . . . Not only does autonomy have a price, but it actively undermines itself. Whereas in the eighteenth century people believed that obedience was the key to happiness, culture shifted and disobedience became the key to happiness. . . . Post-liberals point out that when we shatter norms, the wisdom of tradition, and the communities that historically regulated people's behavior, the state must step in to control the population. . . . Ironically, pursuing individual autonomy leads to centralized state power, which undermines individual autonomy.

An important aspect of this argument is its claim that liberalism is *inherently* self-destructive; it may pretend it is neutral, and may even believe it is neutral, but by its very nature it relentlessly promotes a radical individualism which bulldozes family, faith, and tradition. In his influential 2018 philippic *Why Liberalism Failed,* Patrick Deneen, a political theorist at the University of Notre Dame, declares: "Liberalism has failed—not because it fell short, but because it was true to itself. It has failed because it has succeeded. As liberalism has 'become more fully itself,' as its inner logic has become more evident and its self-contradictions manifest, it has generated pathologies that are at once deformations of its claims yet realizations of liberal ideology." Liberalism, he argues, "has drawn down on a preliberal inheritance and resources that once sustained liberalism but which it cannot replenish. The loosening of social bonds in nearly every aspect of life—familial, neighborly, communal, religious, even national—reflects the advancing logic of liberalism and is the source of its deepest instability."

Now, there is a softer, more nuanced critique which argues that liberalism has self-undermining *tendencies.* To which liberals can reply, "Yes, and you know this because we told you!" Ever since the seventeenth century, liberals have realized, and warned, that liberalism requires outside sources of support and stability. From the beginning, liberal theorists acknowledged that they did not attempt to prescribe an overarching concept of the good or of the purpose of life; rather, they left it up to individuals and civil society to define and supply those values, provided they did so non-coercively. Moral pluralism was a feature, not a bug, because the whole point of liberalism was to put an end to centuries of bloody coercion and war arising from religious and factional attempts to impose one group's moral vision on everyone else.

Liberalism thus challenges citizens and communities to develop "some shared account of the good life and the good community, and some way of forming good citizens who can exercise responsible freedom," as David P. Gushee puts it in his 2023 book *Defending Democracy from Its Christian Enemies.* That is no light burden. "It helped quite a bit that in the societies within which early democracies developed, the religious loyalties of the people were predominantly Christian," Gushee writes. "This religious, moral, and political background filled in much of the moral substance that was *intentionally* left out of liberal democratic constitutional documents. The kinds of people required to operate these new democratic systems—to govern well, to vote wisely, to debate civilly, to write good laws, to live with minimal state supervision—were produced by already-existing moral communities that inculcated moral virtues, values, and vision."

I italicized *intentionally* in the preceding quotation be-

cause the point is worth emphasizing: liberals understood they could not create and sustain virtue by themselves, and they warned against trying. As I noted in Chapter 1, the American Founders told everyone who would listen (and some who wouldn't) that the republic could not endure without a virtuous citizenry. They warned that the Constitution was necessary but not sufficient. Today, you will find similar warnings in the works of America's most prominent liberal thinkers, such as Francis Fukuyama, William Galston, and Peter Berkowitz. They have been outspoken about runaway individualism and woeful civic illiteracy, and they have proposed all sorts of measures, from civics education to political reforms, to make liberalism fairer and kinder. Sometimes I think that we at the Brookings Institution, the think tank where I work in Washington, D.C., do practically nothing else all day. To claim, then, that liberalism's shortcomings are a new discovery or unacknowledged by liberals is—well, cheeky, to say the least.

Going on four centuries after its origin, liberalism has defied every prediction of doom. It has somehow managed not to commit suicide. In some ways, it is more vigorous than ever. In the world as a whole, access to the Big Three liberal institutions—science, liberal democracy, and markets—is improving everyday life at an impressive speed, as a visit to the website *human progress.org* will quickly confirm. (Fact: "In 1950, the average [global] life expectancy at birth was only 48.5 years. In 2019, it was 72.8 years. That's an increase of 50 percent.") Still, point taken: we liberals should not be complacent about liberalism's problems or lazy about working to fix them—and too often, we are. Personal freedom and public-spiritedness will always be in tension; individualism and communitarianism will always require balancing; and sometimes the balance will be skewed—toward community, perhaps, in the 1950s, and toward individualism, perhaps, today.

Nonetheless, we can draw a fair distinction between constructive critiques of liberalism and the 192-proof versions which, traveling under the name *post-liberalism,* claim that liberalism is inherently, irreparably destructive to itself and to human flourishing. In this view, excessive individualism is not a challenging tendency, it is a fatal flaw. For post-liberalism, the seeds of liberalism's doom were present at the creation; society took a catastrophic wrong turn in the '60s—not the 1960s but the 1660s, when John Locke appeared on the scene. In a twist on Marxism, post-liberalism argues that today's democratic discontents are the working-out of liberalism's built-in contradictions and historical inevitabilities. The implication is that liberalism should be replaced with . . . well, with what, exactly? "For post-liberals, the common good, not autonomy, should be our master value," writes McCarthy-Jones. "This common good, they argue, can be objectively established."

The principle of Madisonian liberalism is that the common good cannot be divined objectively or authoritatively by any one person or faction. It must be constantly negotiated. In arguing for a society built on the one *true* idea of the common good, post-liberalism reverts to a pre-Madisonian tradition in which people look to the commands of God and the forms of Nature to anchor political authority. Here some problems arise.

Post-Liberal Pretentions

Detailing the infirmities of post-liberalism is not the purpose of this book; but we can briefly name some of them (there are others).

Straw-manning. Post-liberals set up liberalism as synonymous with libertinism, extreme libertarianism, and other forms of cultural hyper-individualism which mainstream liberalism neither entails nor accepts. According to the journalist

Sohrab Ahmari, for example, liberalism holds "that the goal of our common life together is to maximize the autonomy of the individual. If you wanted to boil down liberal theory to an axiom, it's no doubt that."* They mischaracterize John Locke and other liberal founders as enlisting government to smother tradition and to ignore the common good in the name of unconstrained individual liberty. "A main goal of Locke's philosophy," writes Deneen in *Why Liberalism Failed,* "is to expand the prospects for our liberty—defined as the capacity to satisfy our appetites—through the auspices of the state. . . . Thus one of the liberal state's main roles becomes the active liberation of individuals from any limiting conditions." Deneen has Locke backwards. Locke's great innovation was the idea of an implicit social contract, based on inherent natural rights, whereby free individuals agree to *constrain* the individual *and* the state, by restricting individuals' freedom to dominate each other and restricting the state's freedom to dominate individuals. "Locke's fundamental moral and political premise—that human beings are by nature free and equal—imposes significant limits on individual conduct and government," writes Berkowitz in his review of *Why Liberalism Failed.*† If you want to see rampant suppression of communities and traditions, just look to the countless illiberal regimes which have quashed and persecuted anything not within the state-approved community and tradition. And Ahmari's claim that liberalism's central "axiom" is to maximize individual autonomy at the expense of everything else is a caricature, unrecognizable to liberal theorists except as a red herring. The American Founders understood very well

* Interview with Yascha Mounk, August 12, 2023, available at www.persuasion.community/p/ahmari.

† Peter Berkowitz, "Anti-Liberal Zealotry Part III: Locke and the Liberal Tradition," *RealClearPolicy.com,* September 21, 2018.

the difference between license and ordered liberty, and between unfettered autonomy and delineated rights; they wrote the Constitution precisely for that reason. "Let it be remembered," John Jay wrote in famous instructions to a grand jury, "that civil liberty consists not in a right to every man to do just what he pleases, but it consists in an equal right to all the citizens to have, enjoy, and to do, in peace, security, and without molestation, whatever the equal and constitutional laws of the country admit to be consistent with the public good." Liberalism is premised on supremacy of law and restraint of ego, not supremacy of self and elevation of ego.

Catastrophism. Like Marxism, post-liberalism undervalues, ignores, or takes for granted the unparalleled economic, scientific, social, and moral advances of liberalism: important things like constitutional democracy, mass prosperity, the scientific revolution, outlawing slavery, empowering women, and—not least from my point of view—tolerating atheistic homosexual Jews instead of burning us alive. Post-liberalism's descriptions of liberal societies resemble modern America about as much as Donald Trump's descriptions of urban hellscapes resemble actual U.S. cities. Patrick Deneen is willing to grant (in a handful of asides) that liberalism achieved some real triumphs in the past—but, he writes, "nearly every one of the promises that were made by the architects and creators of liberalism has been shattered." Really? What about unprecedented peace, prosperity, knowledge, freedom, and respect for human rights? Personally, I would rather live in any liberal, market-based democracy than in one of the theocratic, socialist, monarchist, or authoritarian alternatives, and I suspect most of America's post-liberal professoriate would too.

Authoritarianism. Well, maybe some post-liberals would prefer to live in Hungary. Not surprisingly, those who reject liberalism as too individualistic, permissive, and irreligious ro-

manticize the illiberal alternatives—and they show up in Budapest celebrating the likes of Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán, a self-proclaimed advocate of "illiberal democracy" and leader of a global authoritarian-populist movement to undermine democracy. Post-liberals charge that liberalism's commitment to neutrality is a sham, covering up (according to Deneen) a "more insidious" agenda which "surreptitiously remakes the world in its image." But liberalism claims to be neutral only with respect to state procedures such as laws and elections. There is nothing "neutral" about its *values,* such as its core precept that all people are born free and equal. If that precept is the "image" in which liberalism "surreptitiously remakes the world," I'll gladly take it over Orbán.

Make-believe. In keeping with their authoritarian bent, post-liberals seem to imagine a world in which they can wield government authority without interference from other factions—say, progressives, moderates, and libertarians. Worse, they seem to imagine a world in which today's deep political and cultural divisions somehow subside, allowing them to bypass democracy's give-and-take and impose their conservative preferences (which they call the "common good," ignoring competing accounts of the common good). We have a word for such post-political daydreaming: *wishcasting.* In a modern country of 350 million very different people, political and moral disagreement is intrinsic, and some version of liberalism—in our case, James Madison's—is the only system which has proved capable of managing it.

Incoherence. Post-liberalism has no theory of government—or, rather, it has too many theories. Is the state too big and powerful, or too small and weak? That depends. When addressing individual rights, the state is overweening, leveling, and dependency-inducing. When addressing the "common good," the state needs to be more bold and assertive. Which

is it? Post-liberalism seems to slide back and forth as convenience dictates. Also, which aspects of liberal individualism would post-liberals retain, and which would they throw away? Women's equality? Gay rights? Why or why not? Without a coherent theory, we have only their personal preferences.

Vagueness. A critique of modern liberalism needs to tell us, concretely and specifically, what regime is better. What country or state, past or present, is their model? Illiberal democracy, like Orbán's Hungary? Religious nationalism, as in Modi's India? Some sort of Catholic social democracy like—well, like where? Post-liberalism doesn't tell us. "What is most striking about their commitment to what they call classical and Christian values, constantly reiterated in their books," the political theorist Michael Walzer observed in a 2023 interview with Yascha Mounk, "is that they never give us a concrete description of the society in which they think those values prevail. And it would be in the classical cases a society of slavery and war; it would be a society of persecution of heretics, the Inquisition, the pogroms of the Crusades against Jews and then Muslims; deep poverty [and] hierarchy."

Grandstanding. Post-liberals are not shy about declaring liberalism a failure and calling for radical change. (Patrick Deneen has claimed to stand for "regime change," something "far more revolutionary" than the violent overthrow of the U.S. government.* Really?) But when they get down to brass tacks, they proffer a grab-bag of small-bore suggestions which (thank goodness) hardly live up to their revolutionary billing: symbolic government moralism like Sunday closing laws, "pro-worker" policies like reshoring and stricter antitrust rules, communitarian standbys like national service, boilerplate political

*Ian Ward, "'I Don't Want to Violently Overthrow the Government. I Want Something Far More Revolutionary,'" *Politico Magazine,* June 8, 2023.

reforms like expanding the House of Representatives, and a call for conservatives to repopulate elite cultural institutions, whatever that means. One can argue about the worth of such ideas, but none of them is incompatible with liberal constitutionalism or requires "regime change."

In the end, post-liberalism snags itself on a dilemma: its post-liberal ideas are not practical and its practical ideas are not post-liberal. If it wishes to be more than vaporware and become a governing philosophy, it must drop its radical pretentions and content itself with reforms which comport with America's founding traditions; if it wishes to advertise itself as a radical alternative to the whole liberal order, it marginalizes itself with authoritarian daydreaming.

So What Is Christianity's Problem?

Despite post-liberalism's infirmities, liberals can learn from it if we divide its criticisms by ten. I don't mean that comment snidely. Post-liberalism, like critiques going back to Nietzsche (and Plato), does have something to teach us about the challenges facing secular democracies and economies—and, yes, about the challenges which consumerism and individualism and neoliberalism and all the other "isms" pose for religious institutions and traditional values. We need to grant that today's fast-changing, media-addicted, materialistic, liberationist America is not an easy environment for conservative faiths like evangelical Christianity.

Yet it is not possible to blame the troubles of American Christianity solely or even mainly on rampant, aggressive secularism. Consumerism and individualism did not arrive recently; religious figures have been complaining about mammon and cupidity in American life for generations. The mid-twentieth

century provided a stable, culturally conservative consensus in which institutional religion could flourish, but that period was exceptional. Until recently, the United States rightly prided itself on how its pluralism fostered the world's most vibrant marketplace of religions. Americans loved to brag that we owe our religious dynamism not to stagnant state churches, as in Europe, but to the very freedoms which post-liberals now bemoan. Whatever changed for Christianity seems to be of recent vintage, postdating the 1960s by decades and accelerating sharply in the past decade or so.

Do capitalism and consumerism and individualism pose challenges for Christianity? Sure; but let's not forget that they create opportunities too, by increasing the demand for spiritual anchors in a turbulent world. We see this in the soaring demand for pseudo-religions in American life, as well as in the success of evangelicalism in the developing world. As Micklethwait and Wooldridge point out in *God Is Back*, "Faith provides certainty in a world where secular certainties are constantly being undermined. . . . People everywhere, but particularly in the developing world, are reacting to the hurricane of capitalism by taking cover under the canopy of religion." Christianity is thriving and growing in much of the Global South—apparently by offering what people want. Why not in America?

We cannot answer that question by focusing only on the challenges of secularism. Instead, we need to listen to Benjamin Franklin: "When religion is good, I conceive it will support itself; and when it does not support itself, and God does not take care to support [it], so that its professors are obliged to call for help of the civil power, 'tis a sign, I apprehend, of its being a bad one."

In other words, we need to consider the role Christianity has played in its own demise.

The Church of Social Justice

If we wanted to summarize the direction of change in American Christianity over the past century or so, we might do well to use the term *secularization.*

Secularization does not necessarily imply that theology melts away, believers stop believing, churches empty out, and clergy compromise their principles. Up to a point, it can mean cross-pollination as religions interact with their social environments and become less countercultural, with both sides often benefiting from the exchange. In its ill-mannered way, the musical *The Book of Mormon* makes a shrewd observation: religion works best when it adapts to meet the needs of real people. I can speak for many gay and Jewish Americans, and also many women and for that matter Christians, in maintaining that secular influence has helped Christianity become more tolerant, more reality-based, and ultimately more Christlike. Whether secularization is a good or bad thing depends on what is being secularized, by whom, and how.

So, again, secularization is not a dirty word—up to a point. Yet students of religion have persuasively argued that the secularization of both mainline American Protestantism and white evangelical Protestantism went beyond that point, albeit in very different ways.

The story generally told about the mainline, or ecumenical, church is that the first half of the twentieth century brought new challenges. As David A. Hollinger argues in *Christianity's American Fate,* missionary work abroad opened the church's eyes to global issues, while urbanization, immigration, and education shattered its complacency at home. Protestantism found itself confronting "a demographically diverse, sexually and racially egalitarian, globally engaged, and scientifically literate society welcoming to Jews and to other non-Christians." The civil

rights movement and the rise of liberation theology brought further calls for the church to engage with issues like poverty and racism.

While conservative evangelicalism tried to fend off such influences, mainline churches, to their credit, attempted to meet them. Seminaries, divinity schools, and pulpits reflected the progressive values of the politically liberal world. Ecumenical churches' membership reached an all-time high at mid-century, but their commitments were increasingly social, not theological. "One way to join the establishment," Hollinger writes, "was to go to the right church, or to say that you did." Meanwhile, "the ecumenical intelligentsia made little effort to plant their own flag in the Bible. This decision to hold back is one of the most remarkable choices made in the entire history of the campaign for a more cosmopolitan Protestantism."

In a well-intentioned gamble, the mainline church cast its lot with center-left progressivism and let itself drift, or at least seem to drift, from scriptural moorings. In 1996, the religious historian Randall Balmer damned Protestant ecumenicism as "so careful not to offend that its blandness has become an affront. In the eyes of many Americans mainline Protestants have become so intent on blurring theological and denominational distinctiveness that they stand for nothing at all, aside from some vague (albeit noble) pieties like peace, justice, and inclusiveness."*

However noble the mainline church's intentions, as it became more a cultural institution than a spiritual one, its distinctiveness faded. At the same time, it lost its hold on social life; people stopped placing one another on the social ladder by asking which church they belonged to, and started asking

*Randall Balmer, *Grant Us Courage: Travels Along the Mainline of American Protestantism* (Oxford University Press, 1996), 148.

where they worked and went to college. The cultural revolts of the 1960s and 1970s, followed by mass religious disaffiliation, only compounded the church's irrelevance, leading to the meltdown it experienced in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

Although I am neither a Christian nor a progressive, I would love to see a revival of mainline Christianity. Its values and aspirations strike me as noble. Also, as Joseph Bottum and others have argued, the collapse of the ecumenical churches has displaced religious zeal into politics, which is not designed to provide purpose in life and breaks when it tries. I am not saying ecumenical Christianity can make a comeback, or will; but it is far from dead, and hope springs eternal.

Meanwhile, the evangelical side of the church also became secularized, taking a more radical and perilous path.

The Partisan Church

A Republican presidential candidate—one whose apparent extremism alarms not just liberal Democrats but also many establishment Republicans—sits to be interviewed by a prominent evangelical and rhetorically asks: "Do you ever get the feeling sometimes that if we don't do it now, if we let this be another Sodom and Gomorrah, that maybe we might be the generation that sees Armageddon?" Agreeing, the evangelist replies, "This is the most important election ever to face the United States. I really believe that. . . . I don't think anyone knows what has happened in our leadership in the crushing of religion in this country."

Donald Trump and Franklin Graham in 2020? No, Ronald Reagan and Jim Bakker in 1979.

The effective merger of the American evangelical movement with the Republican Party is not new. One can trace its

roots back to the first half of the twentieth century, when conservative evangelicals split from moderate and progressive ecumenicals; then, in the 1960s, to the civil rights movement, which many Southern evangelicals rejected. (Asked to comment on Martin Luther King's 1968 "I have a dream" speech, the evangelist Billy Graham said, "Little white children of Alabama will walk hand in hand with little black children only when Christ comes again." By which he didn't mean soon.) In the 1970s, realizing they could co-opt the racialized, resentful energy George Wallace had tapped, Republican strategists unrolled the welcome mat to white Southern conservatives, including evangelicals. I am old enough to remember when Jimmy Carter, a born-again Christian and a moderate Democrat, could win the presidency with evangelical support. But that was in 1976. By 1980, the Republicans' Southern strategy was firmly established, and realignment was a juggernaut.

In those days, Republican strategists assumed they could manage their new evangelical converts without fundamentally reshaping the party. They supposed that Christian conservative voters could be bought off with symbolic, usually half-hearted gestures like platform planks calling for prayer in public schools. Similarly, evangelical leaders believed their partisan alignment could be managed without fundamentally reshaping the church. Evangelicals would influence the party more than it would influence them. Both assumptions proved wrong.

By the turn of this century, white evangelicals constituted the biggest and most loyal element of the Republican political base. In 2004, according to exit polls, 79 percent of them voted for George W. Bush; in 2012, the same share cast their ballots for Mitt Romney (a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints). Even John McCain, a less conventionally conservative figure, received almost three-fourths of the white evangelical vote in 2008.

"Despite their declining share of the electorate since the beginning of the twenty-first century," write the Brookings Institution's E. J. Dionne and William Galston, "white evangelicals continue to represent a formidable voting bloc. They constitute about 30 percent of Republican identifiers as well as 14 percent of the electorate."* It is no exaggeration to say that Republicans cannot win nationally without white evangelicals' support. For most intents and purposes, the white evangelical movement has become a one-party town. According to the religious demographer Ryan Burge, "White evangelicalism has never been more politically unified than it is right now. In the 1970s, only 40 percent of white weekly churchgoing evangelicals identified as Republicans; in the most recent data, that number has risen to an all-time high of 70 percent."†

The bond was more than an electoral alliance; political and religious messaging merged, too. "From 1976 onward," writes Thomas S. Kidd in his 2019 book *Who Is an Evangelical? The History of a Movement in Crisis,* "'evangelical' would increasingly connote the white religious Republican base." An apt and quite un-endearing symbol of the merger of church and party was a Christmas image posted in 2021 by a Republican congressman showing his whole family posing in front of a Christmas tree with military-style rifles.‡ (Is that what Jesus would do?)

If the political union of white evangelical Christianity with

*E. J. Dionne, Jr., and William A. Galston, "How Younger Voters Will Impact Elections: What Is Happening to the White Evangelical Vote?" The Brookings Institution, June 27, 2023.

†Ryan Burge, "Why 'Evangelical' Is Becoming Another Word for 'Republican,'" *New York Times,* October 26, 2021.

‡Joey Garrison, "Andy Ogles, GOP Congressman Representing Nashville Shooting Site, Criticized for Posing with Guns in Family Christmas Photo," *USA Today,* March 27, 2023.

Republican partisanship began as a marriage of convenience, it soon evolved into codependency. Perhaps inevitably, partisanship backflowed into the church, causing a spiral in which white conservative Republicans self-selected into evangelical religious identities and those identities in turn reinforced the church's partisanship. In her 2018 book *From Politics to the Pews: How Partisanship and the Political Environment Shape Religious Identity,* Michele F. Margolis argues against the standard idea that religious belief drives partisan political preferences. Rather, there is a reciprocal relationship in which partisanship also drives religious identification. The spiral, she writes, can become self-propelled: "If partisans select into or out of religious communities, in part, based on their political outlooks, they will find themselves in more politically homogeneous social networks where they encounter less diverse political information. Rather than churches being places where people with different political viewpoints come together, religious communities may become more like echo chambers populated by like-minded partisans." Sharp Christianity intensifies partisanship, which further sharpens Christianity. And what if partisan politics becomes the main reason people choose to identify as evangelicals? Could party loyalty elbow Jesus aside? Could evangelical Christianity become, for many who affiliate with it, primarily a political rather than religious identity?

That appears to have happened. "Instead of theological affinity for Jesus Christ, millions of Americans are being drawn to the evangelical label because of its association with the GOP," writes Burge. "Now the data indicate that more and more Americans are conflating evangelicalism with Republicanism—and melding two forces to create a movement that is not entirely about politics or religion but power." Perhaps especially telling is that, according to Burge, the share of self-identified

evangelicals who attend church "seldom or never" rose from about 10 percent in 2008 to more than a fourth in 2020. In 2021, the Pew Research Center found that "there has been no large-scale departure from evangelicalism among white Americans"—but this was because an inflow of Trump supporters began identifying as evangelical, "perhaps reflecting the strong association between Trump's political movement and the evangelical religious label."*

Looking at such data, Burge suggested in a 2021 *New York Times* article that "'evangelical' is not a religious term anymore." Prominent evangelicals have made the same point. "The kind of cultural Christianity we now see often keeps everything about the Religious Right except the religion," wrote Russell Moore in *Christianity Today* (where he became editor after stepping down as head of the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission).† Peter Wehner, of the Trinity Forum, observed in a 2022 interview with *American Purpose* that "a spiritual outlook has been replaced by a core identity that's political." Whereas churches used to argue about doctrinal matters, he added, "it's now things like critical race theory or Disney or where you stand on Trump or masks or vaccines. That's something new and very worrisome."‡ Curtis Chang, a scholar and former pastor, told me bluntly: "At this point, 'evangelical' is a political uniform; it's code for politically conservative."

* Gregory A. Smith, "More White Americans Adopted Than Shed Evangelical Label During Trump Presidency, Especially His Supporters," Pew Research Center, September 15, 2021.

† Russell Moore, "When the South Loosens Its Bible Belt," *Christianity Today*, August 11, 2022.

‡ Available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=N1Orn_Zu4_8.

Unforced Error

One might be inclined to blame the secular culture for white evangelicalism's embrace of political partisanship. Evangelicals' values (runs this argument) have been under siege by the secular world and the political left; were conservatives supposed to sit there and suck their thumbs? Perhaps (this argument continues) some might expect conservative Christians to meekly accept the industrial-scale murder of unborn children, the aggressive promotion of LGBT ideology, the left's intolerance of traditional social mores, and the relentless advance of wokeness in universities, corporations, and the media; but enough is enough. It is both natural and biblical for Christians to stand up for their values.

One problem with this view is that the idea of a relentless legal attack on Christianity is fanciful. Never before in American history have the law and the Supreme Court been as protective of religious liberty as they are right now. As the historian and evangelical Paul Matzko said (in a podcast interview with *The UnPopulist* in 2022), "Conservative American Christians are not just the least persecuted religious community in the world today, they're arguably the least actually persecuted religious community in all of human history." As I drafted this paragraph, the Supreme Court had just delivered the latest in a string of victories for freedom of religion and conscience, ruling that commercial creative enterprises can turn away business which requires them to express ideas they object to. A Christian-owned web designer has a constitutional right to refuse service for a same-sex wedding. The court has affirmed the ministerial exemption in religious-based hiring; it has blessed the flow of public tax dollars to private religious schools; it has exempted giant corporations in secular industries from government regulations on religious grounds; on and on. "In fact,"

wrote the lawyer and commentator (and evangelical) David French, in a 2022 article for *The Dispatch*, "religious freedom is enjoying a decade-long winning streak at the Supreme Court, with most of the key cases decided through right-left supermajorities."

No doubt, activists on the secular left would like to withdraw federal tax deductions and contracts from faith-based charities which discriminate against LGBT people; but in 2022, in the Respect for Marriage Act, Congress repudiated such efforts—with the unanimous support of Democrats. Respect for freedom of conscience is at the core of liberalism; and accommodation for freedom of religion is specifically enshrined in the Constitution, as well as in the 1993 Religious Freedom Restoration Act. Polling by the Pew Research Center in 2023 found that only 27 percent of Americans took an unfavorable view of evangelicals, and disapproval of mainline Protestants and Catholics was even lower. America is anything but a combat zone for Christianity. The "war on Christmas" is entirely made up.

"Well," some Christians might reply, in defense of the proposition that their faith is embattled, "maybe the law is protective of religious freedom. Maybe the general public isn't out to get us. But you can't deny that cultural elites treat conservative white Christians as deplorables. Christians are constantly demeaned and condemned. It's natural and justifiable for us to push back."

That is true to an extent. You won't find a lot of conservative evangelicals in Harvard faculty meetings or the *New York Times* newsroom (though you will find some). But moral conviction is a two-way street, and conservative evangelicals are not the only ones with values to defend. To the extent that the progressive cultural establishment abhors conservative evangelicals, it does so mainly because of their conservatism, not

their Christianity. From a secular, progressive point of view, white conservative evangelicals' history of opposing fundamental human rights for blacks, women, and sexual minorities is shameful, as is their opposition to abortion rights today. Right or wrong, the progressives' claims have substantive moral weight and should not be personalized as expressions of anti-Christian bigotry.

But let us set that caveat aside. Let's grant that America's secular culture has been adversarial to conservative Christian values. Let's grant, too, that the secular left has been aggressive and successful in moving the Overton window in its direction, especially on cultural issues. (Homosexual people like me are a huge beneficiary, and we don't apologize.) Let's grant that the country is drifting toward godlessness, that Christians are headed toward minority status, that the country is diversifying away from white Protestant preeminence. How should white evangelicals respond? With political activism, yes. Perhaps even some degree of partisanship, up to a point.

We can debate where that point is; but there came a moment when that point was passed and then left far behind. Absolutely nothing about secular liberalism required white evangelicals to embrace the likes of Donald Trump.

A Choice and a Change

As familiar as the facts became during the decade when Trump dominated the U.S. political landscape, we might still remind ourselves how he inverted what were once understood as core Christian values. He entered the national policy conversation in 1989 by taking out full-page ads in four New York City newspapers demanding that the state adopt the death penalty for five black teenagers, saying, "I want to hate these murderers and I always will," and he did not change his stance when they

were later proven innocent. He made his debut in national politics by slurring a black presidential candidate as not American. As president, he demanded that two black congresswomen, both born in the United States, "go back" to "the places from which they came." He bragged that, as a celebrity, he could "grab [women] by the pussy," and a jury subsequently found he had done exactly that. He diverted funds from his putative charity for personal use and was forced by a court to acknowledge the scam. In his business, he routinely stiffed his contractors. His company was found guilty of criminal and civil tax fraud. He lied his way to the presidency: 70 percent of his fact-checked statements in the 2016 campaign were found by PolitiFact to be mostly or entirely false. He lied his way *through* the presidency: his first two acts as president were to lie about the size of his inaugural crowd and whether it rained during his inauguration; thereafter, according to the *Washington Post*'s fact checkers, he perpetrated an average of 20 falsehoods a day. His post-election "Stop the Steal" campaign constituted the most audacious and successful disinformation attack ever mounted against our country by any actor, foreign or domestic. He tried to end our democracy by attempting to overturn an election, refused to acknowledge the possibility of his fair defeat, told far-right militia groups to "stand back and stand by" for insurrection, incited mob violence at the Capitol (and told the mob he "loved" them), placed his own vice president in mortal danger, encouraged thugs to defame and menace election officials, and explicitly called for the "termination of all rules, regulations, and articles, even those found in the Constitution"—which, if his corrupt scheme to overturn the 2020 election had succeeded, he might have achieved.

Knowing all that, one must also recall that his signature characteristic, his political specialty, and his one true genius was his sociopathic cruelty. He called women things like "horse-

face," said they were too ugly to rape, and ridiculed them for menstruating; he mocked the heroic and the handicapped; he humiliated his rivals with epithets and his loyalists with indignities. Basic decency was foreign to him, and fellow humans mere outlets for his monstrously fragile ego.

Yet Trump won more than 80 percent of the evangelical vote in 2016, more than George W. Bush (an avowed born-again), John McCain, or Mitt Romney. Although white evangelicals were initially wary of him, the die was cast as early as January 2016, when he traveled to an evangelical college in Iowa to make a promise. "Christianity will have power," he said. "If I'm there, you're going to have plenty of power, you don't need anybody else. You're going to have somebody representing you very, very well. Remember that."

They did remember—not, apparently, minding that in the very same speech he mocked and exposed them by bragging that they would support him even if he shot someone on Fifth Avenue. If ever there was a Mephistophelian moment in American politics, that was it.

Mephistopheles was good at rationalizing, and evangelicals offered many rationalizations for the deal they made with Trump. *He was better than Hillary Clinton.* Perhaps so, in November 2016; but that did not explain evangelicals' redoubled support for him long after Hillary Clinton had left the scene. *He made good Supreme Court appointments.* Other Republicans would have chosen from the same list, which was assembled by the Federalist Society and handed to him. *He was running for president, not preacher.* Trump was not a hypocrite who sinned in private; his cruelty and shamelessness defined not only his personality but his policies and rhetoric. He endorsed torture, stealing oil, and murdering alleged terrorists' relatives; tore howling babies from the arms of migrant parents (as of this writing, about 1,000 families had not been reunited); mused

about shooting migrants in the legs; used military aid for political blackmail; pardoned duly convicted war criminals; encouraged violence against journalists and protesters. One would have thought that, for Christians, his prideful cruelty might have disqualified him as both preacher *and* president.

Before Trump's emergence, the evangelical world had insisted that character matters—even though presidents aren't preachers. In a 2016 poll headlined "Backing Trump, White Evangelicals Flip-Flop on Importance of Candidate Character," the Public Religion Research Institute (in collaboration with Religion News Service and the Brookings Institution) noted that in 2011, when Barack Obama was president, only 30 percent of white evangelicals said that "an elected official who commits an immoral act in their personal life can still behave ethically and fulfill their duties in their public and professional life." Five years later, when Donald Trump led the Republican presidential ticket, *72 percent* of white evangelicals gave personal immorality a pass. Among American religious groups, white evangelicals had switched from being the least accepting of personal immorality among public officials to being the *most* accepting. Something had changed, and it probably was not the Gospel.

Sophisticated Christians rationalized support for Trump by calling him a kind of necessary evil, or, in the words of Os Guinness, "God's wrecking ball stopping America in its tracks [from] the direction it's going and giving the country a chance to rethink." In this view, a vote for Trump was less a positive endorsement than an effort to prevent a true catastrophe in the form of Hillary Clinton. Although not lacking in sense, this argument had a couple of deficiencies. One was that, back in the not-so-ancient Bill Clinton era, evangelicals had maintained that bad character was disqualifying in its own right, not just conditionally, and they had derided what was sometimes called

"compartmentalization" of the president's moral defects. A deeper problem was that conservative Christians could have chosen to accept Trump reluctantly while vigorously calling out his depravity and seeking and supporting better alternatives.

The poll results suggested, however, that one could set aside the rationalizations. Few white evangelicals even bothered with them. Most did not support Trump reluctantly. They were not temporizing until a less crude, corrupt, and cruel alternative emerged (because, of course, there were many such alternatives, starting with his vice president). They did not merely support Trump, they *adored* him. He was a warrior, a champion who said aloud what others merely thought, who made progressives tremble with rage. Sure, maybe he was "rough around the edges," but here at last was a leader who *fights*. When he deployed tear gas to disperse lawful protesters for a photo op in which he stood in front of a church (which he did not enter) and held up a Bible (which he did not pretend to have opened), I saw an obvious charlatan, but his Christian supporters seemed thrilled. They seemed to regard even his insincerity as a form of tribute.

"Evangelicals were looking for a protector, an aggressive, heroic, manly man, someone who wasn't restrained by political correctness or feminine virtues, someone who would break the rules for the right cause," writes Kristin Kobes Du Mez, in her 2020 book *Jesus and John Wayne*. "In fact, the more unconventional, bombastic, and offensive he became, the more evangelicals seemed to rally to his side." Today, when white evangelicals have seen so many depravities from Trump and MAGA and have forgone so many opportunities to rethink their loyalty, it is not possible to avoid the truth of her conclusion: "In 2016, many observers were stunned at evangelicals' apparent betrayal of their own values. In reality, evangelicals did not cast their vote despite their beliefs, but because of them."

Was conservative white Christians' embrace of Trump a natural culmination of decades-long trends? Or was it a break with the past? The answer has to be: some of both. Many authorities emphasize continuity. Du Mez notes that bully-worship did not appear in the church out of nowhere:

> Evangelical support for Trump was no aberration, nor was it merely a pragmatic choice. It was, rather, the culmination of evangelicals' embrace of militant masculinity, an ideology that enshrines patriarchal authority and condones the callous display of power, at home and abroad. By the time Trump arrived proclaiming himself their savior, conservative white evangelicals had already traded a faith that privileges humility and elevates "the least of these" for one that derides gentleness as the province of wusses.

Similarly, David Hollinger concludes: "Contrary to the view that evangelicalism is a benign presence in American life, hijacked by outsiders, I argue that evangelicalism's history prepared it to be just what it showed itself to be in the era of Donald Trump."

No doubt, the predicates of the First Church of MAGA had been developing for a long time. By the time Trump came along, the church's partisan cast and paranoid disposition had made the evangelical world receptive. True—but *dis*continuity deserves the greater emphasis. Trump's violations of Christian ethical norms, his cruelty and crudity and bullying and lying, went far beyond any precedent in American politics. Even George Wallace was a gentle country deacon by comparison. Trump was a next-level phenomenon, and white evangelicals' decision to make him their champion was not implied by their history up to that point. Having been cool to him initially, they

could very well have rejected him as too much of a bad thing. They might have questioned what their effective merger with the Republican Party was doing to their church and their souls. Instead they doubled down—again and again. One was left to conclude that Trump had been right in Iowa: there seemed to be no misbehavior which his white evangelical base could not rationalize or overlook. And this was something no one could have foreseen. Whatever the predicates, embracing Trump and MAGA was fundamentally a choice and a change.

Witnessing that choice, shocked by it, I lost my hard-won faith. Not in God, but in Christians. In my youth, I had been an atheist of the militant, angry variety. I had seen little but hypocrisy and cruelty in Christianity. But then I got to know Christians who walked the walk. I came to appreciate that there was a radically self-effacing and kind side to Christian doctrine, and that even the doctrines I disagreed with (such as the condemnation of homosexuality) could, in principle, be defended in good faith on scriptural grounds. During the gay marriage debate, I assured my LGBT friends that Christians on the other side weren't bigots and haters, at least not usually; that even when wrong, they were sincerely trying to follow God's word as they understood it. I said, "They may be wrong, but they aren't mean."

The Trump phenomenon made me doubt all that. My breaking point came in April 2020, when Albert Mohler, a leading Southern Baptist authority whose integrity I had taken seriously, endorsed Trump for reelection despite having rejected him in 2016 as "beneath the baseline level of human decency."* At that point, I had to throw in the towel. I had to accept that my younger self and my LGBT friends had been right—if not

*In 2023, Mohler said he would not support Trump in the Republican primaries.

entirely, than in dismayingly great measure. The majority of white evangelicals followed a leader who was not even a little like Jesus. Cruelty and hypocrisy were the order of the day. I felt suckered. I wasn't alone.

Betraying the Beatitudes

Here I will skate out on thin ice. Being no believer, I am in no position to lecture Christians on Christianity. Yet I am not unique in thinking that white evangelicals' embrace of partisanship, culture war, and bully-worship betrayed their faith. Many prominent evangelicals (and some ex-evangelicals) believe the same thing. Writes Peter Wehner: "In important respects, much of what is distinctive about American evangelicalism has become antithetical to authentic Christianity. What we're dealing with—not in all cases, of course, but in far too many—is political identity and cultural anxieties, anti-intellectualism and ethnic nationalism, resentments and grievances, all dressed up as Christianity."* The late Michael Gerson: "White religious conservatives have joined a political movement defined by an attitude of 'us' vs. 'them,' and dedicated to the rejection and humiliation of social outsiders and outcasts. . . . This view of politics is closer to 'Game of Thrones' than to the Beatitudes."† Russell Moore: "If there is no eternity, then we should just fall into the same old culture-war patterns as the rest of the world. We should find an in-group and justify whatever they do—and we should identify an out-group so we can relentlessly hound them as stupid and wicked. But if there is a heaven and a hell

* Peter Wehner, "The Evangelical Church Is Breaking Apart," *The Atlantic*, October 24, 2021.

† Michael Gerson, "Trump Should Fill Christians with Rage. How Come He Doesn't?" *Washington Post*, September 1, 2022.

and a Holy Spirit, then that posture is not just wrongheaded; it's satanic."*

James Alison, a Catholic theologian and priest, provides a clarifying framework for thinking about the choices white conservative Christians have made. Asked by the podcaster and journalist Andrew Sullivan to summarize the teachings of Jesus, he said in 2023 that they could be boiled down to three tenets. "I think the first one would be to not be afraid. . . . The second one would be, imitate me [i.e., Jesus]. And the third one would be, forgive each other, because that's how you'll be forgiven. That's it."

Don't be afraid. Imitate Jesus. Forgive each other. I am in no position to judge whether those are *the* essential elements of Christianity, but they certainly command broad and deep reverence in America's Christian traditions. In any case, they are the elements of Christianity which resonate most with me, the unbeliever, and which strike me as being (along with the concept of grace) Christianity's distinctive and transcendent moral innovations. So shall we run down the list?

Don't be afraid is one of the Bible's most frequently repeated commands. Yet today's white evangelical world seems consumed by fear. There is fear of the left: "Fear," as Paul Matzko has said, "that if Donald Trump doesn't win in 2016, isn't reelected in 2020, that is the end of American Christianity as we know it, that the godless humanists and feminists and civil rights activists are going to swamp America and destroy what makes us great." There is fear of cultural change. More than three-fourths of white evangelicals say the country is in danger of losing its identity and culture—by which they mean *their* identity and culture. There is fear that Christians already face

* Russell Moore, "We Lose Culture Wars by Putting Them on Trial," *Christianity Today*, March 16, 2023.

discrimination and will soon lose the freedom to practice their faith (many, during Covid, believed they had lost their freedom already). There is fear of demographic change, and with it, ethnic or racial marginalization. A senior pastor in North Carolina, speaking to me about Trump, said, "I believe he spoke to scared white people: *If we're not careful, they're going to take over. Demographically, there's going to be more of them than of us.* For some folks, that's threatening."

Above all, there is fear of loss of status. "They realize they no longer have numbers on their side," Kristin Du Mez told me. "They see that the democratic process will not secure their aims for them. *We've lost the culture; they're coming for us; we've got to defend the right to live as obedient, faithful Christians.*"

My understanding of Christianity and of its totemic instruction not to be afraid is that the Christian's eyes should focus on the next world, not this world; and that, although fear is natural, faith is *super*natural, so that the prospect of redemption in the next world should assuage our fears in this one. "Apocalyptic and hysterical rhetoric is inappropriate for people who are children of the King," James Forsyth, the senior pastor at Cedar Springs Presbyterian Church, told Michael Gerson and Peter Wehner in a 2015 article for *Christianity Today*. "Christians should not be characterized by white knuckles of fear and terror." Sharp Christianity, by contrast, is *literally* a Church of Fear.

Imitating Jesus is something that many evangelicals, including many culture warriors, often do admirably in their capacities as friends, family members, churchgoers, and local volunteers. The west Texas pastor who complained of his congregants' battlefield mindset told me his parishioners generously help the needy who are in their line of sight. "But so much of the Gospel message is to love the marginalized, love the foreigner; and that falls on deaf ears."

Still farther from the personal line of sight is the realm of politics, and there a new wall of separation has arisen: not between church and state, but between personal Christianity and public Christianity. It rationalizes political conduct whose cruelty Christians would abhor in their church lives; it sets up two incommensurable moralities, an absolute one in the personal realm and an instrumental one in the political realm.

Many Christian activists and theologians maintain that Christianity is a seamless garment. It does not accept a distinction between the values Christians display in their personal lives and those they display in their public and political lives. It rejects the attitude which David French, speaking at a Trinity Forum event in 2023, described piquantly as: *I know I'm a bit of an asshole on Twitter, but you should see me in the soup kitchen.* "That's just not the way it works," he said. "You can't cabin off parts of your life. . . . If we wall [civic life] off . . . , we are not exhibiting the virtues that Christ asked us to exhibit."

Nor, he and others add, does Christianity accept that the command to imitate Jesus is conditioned on worldly success: on Christian behavior's succeeding or "working," whatever that means. In a speech to an audience of young conservatives in 2021, Donald Trump, Jr., said this: "We've turned the other cheek, and I understand, sort of, the biblical reference—I understand the mentality—but it's gotten us nothing. Okay? It's gotten us nothing, while we've ceded ground in every major institution in our country." One wonders what exactly Jesus "got" in exchange for being tortured, mutilated, and crucified. David French's comment is worth quoting at length (from the Trinity Forum event, lightly edited for continuity):

> God did not give us a spirit of fear but a power of love and of sound mind. So if you're confronting the world and you're not fearful, but you have confidence in the

power of God, you're loving your neighbor, and you're approaching the world with a sober, sound mind, you're blazing forth in a countercultural way. And what's really important about these obligations: they're not contingent upon *working*. It's not, *You're humble until humility doesn't work*. None of that is contingent. The fruits of the spirit are not just tactics to be deployed to win people over. They're the markers of *Who. We. Are.*

Walling off public from private Christianity in order to "win" (whatever that means) often does *not* win, of course. It blackens the reputation of the faith and fuels justified cynicism about the faithful. More than that, it indentures Jesus Christ to Niccolò Machiavelli, the master of *realpolitik*. Russell Moore recounted, on his podcast:

So much of this is just tribal signaling. Whose side are you on, and that means who's the common enemy? In almost every arena, when somebody would say, "Wait a minute, let's hold onto and maintain our democratic norms in the political arena," . . . the response would often be, "Get real!" And so it was this sense that if you're not Machiavellian and you're not willing to knife your way through, then you're not living in the real world. That's a point of view, but it's completely opposite to the point of view of Jesus. It's a social Darwinian view. It's not that we ended up with this sort of Joel Osteen prosperity gospel, but we ended up with a depravity gospel.

Forgiving each other as God has forgiven us, and letting God settle our accounts, is the beating heart of Jesus's ministry; of late, though, white evangelicals have not been in a very forgiving mood. In 2023, Trump told a thrilled conservative

audience, "I am your warrior. I am your justice. And for those who have been wronged and betrayed: *I am your retribution.*" One might ask: is this doctrine not a root-and-branch repudiation of the ministry of Jesus? If Christians have given their hearts over to "retribution," have they not become antagonists of the creed they claim to follow? Don't they sound an awful lot like the mob who brayed for Jesus's execution?

Can we really, then, blame the secular world for the path conservative Christians have chosen? Or should we rather say that white evangelical Christianity, in its embrace of MAGA values, has repudiated itself? If so, can we expect the secular world not to notice? Russell Moore told the Trinity Forum, "The frantic rage we can often display in supposedly protecting Christian values might feel like strength, but the world sees it for what it is: fear, anxiety, and lack of confidence. They can also see that it's nothing like the confident tranquility of Jesus." Can we blame secular liberalism if so many Americans, especially younger ones, recoil from the Church of Fear? "That sense of paralyzing fear can also fuel the loss of the next generation," Moore writes. "If the only choices we offer are secularization and paganization, we shouldn't be surprised that they choose one or the other."*

And can we blame the secular world for losing confidence in Christianity if so many *Christians* have lost confidence in Christianity? Moore, again, elaborates:

The church is bleeding out the next generation, not because "the culture" is so opposed to the church's fidelity to the truth, but just the reverse. The culture often does not reject us because they don't believe the church's doc-

* Russell Moore, "Tucker Carlson and the Fear of Being Replaced," *Christianity Today*, May 4, 2023.

trinal and moral teachings, but because they have evidence that the *church* doesn't believe its own doctrinal and moral teachings. They suspect that Jesus is just a means to an end—to some political agenda, to a market for selling merchandise, or for the predatory appetites of some maniacal narcissist.*

The pastors I interviewed are not, admittedly, a representative sample. Still, I found it meaningful that they were not inclined to blame outside forces for the secularization and "battlefield mindset" they see in their congregations. They acknowledged challenges like social media and cable news and online pornography; but, like Moore, they were unsparing in their assessment that the church has failed to stand its ground. One Southern Baptist pastor told me that the next great mission field is not abroad or among nonbelievers but within the American evangelical church itself. It needs to be reconverted, he said, to the message of the gospel.

We liberals need to wish him well with that mission and help when we can. We need to try to be part of the solution rather than the problem—and, I will argue, we can and should do better on that score. Ultimately, however, we did not cause Christianity's crisis, and we cannot resolve it. When post-liberals blame secular culture for the decline of Christian values and look to "revolutionary reforms" and "regime change" for answers, their daydreaming does the church no favors.

But perhaps that's enough of my lecturing Christians about their faith. My business is the salvation of our democracy, not

* Russell Moore, "Enraged by Ravi (Part 1): The Wreckage of Ravi Zacharias," February 15, 2021, available at www.russellmoore.com/2021/02/15/enraged-by-ravi-part-1-the-wreckage-of-ravi-zacharias/.

of the church. And so I turn to another point: the Church of Fear is as toxic to democracy as it is to Christianity.

What, If Anything, Is Christian Nationalism?

The Church of Fear is not shy about propounding its politics. It wants us to know how it sees the world, and the picture it paints is dire.

In July 2023, Jim Garlow, the former pastor of Skyline Church near San Diego and a well-known figure in conservative evangelical circles, participated in an onstage conversation at Cornerstone Chapel, a church in Northern Virginia. Garlow is a global activist and unashamed advocate of preaching politics from the pulpit. Asked for a tour d'horizon of "what the enemy is up to," he laid it all out in under an hour.*

"*Blessed is the nation whose god is the Lord,*" he begins. "Assuming that's true, which it is, then the flip side [is] *Cursed is the nation whose god is not the Lord.*" Therefore we must lift up godly leaders. No government leader is perfect, he cautions, "but I want you to pray for people who are willing to adhere to biblical principles."

Who might those leaders be? First on his list is President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi of Egypt, "who's holding the Muslim Brotherhood down and rebuilding the Christian churches that the Muslim Brotherhood burns down." (Sisi is an autocrat. Egypt is rated "not free" by Freedom House, which cites, among many examples of the government's authoritarianism, its imprisonment of dissidents in filthy prisons where some are reportedly tortured.) Garlow also is "really applauding" Israeli President

* Jim Garlow, interview with Pastor Gary Hamrick, July 19, 2023, available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=9YhBt-LoNv4.

Benjamin Netanyahu for his "badly needed" effort to strip the Israeli Supreme Court of its power to restrain legislative majorities. (That effort resulted in massive protests by citizens fearing, with reason, the end of any check on government power.) Garlow speaks glowingly of his two meetings with Brazil's former president Jair Bolsonaro, who is "falsely charged" with corruption. (Though Freedom House rated Bolsonaro's Brazil as free, it notes that his authoritarian tactics included harassing journalists and threatening the Supreme Court.) And he waxes enthusiastic over Viktor Orbán, "controversial to some, not to me. He's giving godly leadership in spite of the accusations against that man." (Once a success story for post-Soviet democracy, Hungary is now rated only "partly free" by Freedom House. Orbán's ruling party "pushed through constitutional and legal changes that have allowed it to consolidate control over the country's independent institutions, including the judiciary. The Fidesz government has since passed anti-immigrant and anti-LGBT+ policies, as well as laws that hamper the operations of opposition groups, journalists, universities, and nongovernmental organizations that are critical of the ruling party.")

What do those leaders have in common (besides their authoritarian tendencies, that is)? They are "trying to bring the Judeo-Christian value structure to the country." Also, they are persecuted. "That's a pattern globally we have run into over and over: when good people get thrown out, this kind of thing happens," Garlow observes. "Where have we ever seen this pattern before? . . . We recognize that pattern. I served on President Trump's faith advisory board."

Meanwhile, the Enemy is on the march. "In one country after another they use the same language over and over. Satan is not particularly creative in the way he's operating right now." Some may be unaware of the stakes because the media obscures them. ("You need to be very careful and not believe much of

what is reported in media.") Those stakes? "We're up against a cosmic struggle. This is a totalitarian authoritarianism on the move globally. When you talk about World Economic Forum. When you talk about DEI. Or ESGs. Or the fifteen-minute city, if you've heard of that. . . . It goes on and on, the totalitarianism. It's been on a mushroom the last three and a half years at a staggering pace. That's what we're dealing with."*

And don't assume you can hide. You can't. "I assure you, the Enemy would love to take *this* congregation out."

Fortunately, there is something you *can* do. "The issue," Garlow continues, "is, *Can we save the republic? Is America worth saving?* Yes. . . . What's the answer? Biblical truth. So you can take your camera out, you can take your phone out, take a picture of that [QR code] right now and you can order online, or at the table we have a bunch of books for you we've shipped out here." You can get two copies for the price of one! Better yet, buy a whole box for $150 (and don't worry, the author isn't taking a profit).

More good news; Pastor Garlow has another book coming out! It tackles "the biblical foundation for AI. . . . Genetic mutation. Cloning. Reparations. ESG. DEI. BLM. CRT. All of these hot-button topics that you see in the news every night, 60 of them, I lay out the biblical foundations for every one of those. And they're short chapters. They're intentionally very short."

But wait, there's even more! Garlow hopes to make available "a youth version, a children's version, and, if we can, a children's coloring book. The left, the Enemy, is going after people this young, so so are we."

I sell books at my talks (or try to), and mine cost more

* "Fifteen-minute cities" may refer to an urban design concept which seeks to make goods and services conveniently accessible on foot and by bike.

than Pastor Garlow's (sorry, you can't get a crate for $150), so I probably shouldn't tease him for telling audiences they can save the Republic by buying his book. Still, his short talk distills so many themes of the Church of Fear that one could write a dissertation on it. *Christian nationalism:* God smiles only on Christian countries. *Authoritarianism:* what's a little repression or torture in pursuit of biblical ends? *Paranoia:* we're always persecuted. *Apocalypticism:* the whole country—no, the whole world—is at stake, right at this moment. *Fear:* they're coming to get you, right here in this church. *Politicization:* every Christian, even young children, must be enlisted in the culture war!

Christian nationalism is deservedly a subject of much concern nowadays. I confess that, having read a good deal about it, I have trouble putting my finger on exactly what it is. Even its nomenclature is contested; David Gushee, for example, makes a persuasive case that the term *authoritarian reactionary Christianity* is more accurate and inclusive. However named, it does not appear to have a clear or consistent doctrine. Rather, it seems to involve a cluster of beliefs and characteristics, not all of which occur in every variant or individual. One element is some form of white nationalism or replacement theory, the belief that the American way of life is threatened by people from outside the pale of Christian civilization: minorities, immigrants, Jews, or some other group or movement to whom America does not properly "belong." The flip side is the belief that white Christians are the most persecuted group in America. Instead of being persecuted (in this view), Christianity should be privileged by law and society, or at least should be first among equals in America's political and cultural life. And Christians—meaning white, conservative Christians—deserve to win in politics, and they *would* win if the system weren't rigged.

Students of the subject emphasize that Christian nationalism, whatever it is, is a political phenomenon, not a religious one. Russell Moore says it "refers to the use of Christian words, symbols, or rituals as a means to shore up an ethnic or national identity." Kristin Du Mez identifies it as "the belief that America is God's chosen nation and must be defended as such." Jemar Tisby calls it "an ethno-cultural ideology that uses Christian symbolism to create a permission structure for the acquisition of political power and social control." What all these scholars agree upon is that Christian nationalism is about *power*—not spiritual but worldly. "Those Americans who adhere most strongly to Christian nationalist ideals have *political* interests particularly in mind," write Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry in *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States.* "Religious interests rank second, if they rank at all." A commitment to Christian nationalism, they add, "is not in any way similar to 'religious commitment' as sociologists often conceptualize it. This is not merely semantics. . . . Christian nationalism often influences Americans' opinions and behaviors in the *exact opposite direction* than traditional religious commitment does."

Who are the adherents, and how many are they? Again, this is hard to pin down. In a 2023 report, the Public Religion Research Institute sought to identify and count both hard-core adherents and softer sympathizers using a screen of five questions, such as whether respondents believe that "the U.S. government should declare America a Christian nation" or that "if the U.S. moves away from our Christian foundations, we will not have a country anymore." They found that about 29 percent of the public is committed to those ideas or sympathizes with them. That was broadly consistent with a separate estimate by Whitehead and Perry.

Two further points are of concern here. One is the association between Christian nationalism, white evangelicalism,

Republican partisanship, and support for Donald Trump and the MAGA movement. In its 2023 report, the Public Religion Research Institute found that most Republicans were Christian nationalist adherents or sympathizers, that most Christian nationalists were white evangelical Protestants, and that most supported Trump. Christian nationalists were also much more likely to express comfort with authoritarianism and political violence. In their affinity for this cluster of political values, Robert P. Jones (who leads the Public Religion Research Institute) has said, "White evangelical Protestants really do stand alone."*

Remember, though, that Christian nationalism is not a religious creed but a political one—which explains why its influence extends beyond the pews to the Republican Party's conservative base more broadly. According to Whitehead and Perry, it "motivates Americans—*whether they are evangelical or not*—to see Trump as the defender of the power and values they perceive are being threatened" (my italics). It is a form of secularization in which Christian identity, partisanship, and MAGA-style ideology swap genes and hybridize to create a kind of pseudo-Christian chimera. In his deeply researched 2023 book *The Godless Crusade,* the Oxford University scholar Tobias Cremer describes an international phenomenon:

> Rather than embracing Christianity as a faith, right-wing populists in the United States, Germany and France are politicizing Christianity as a secularized identity marker to mobilize voters in the context of a new social cleavage, centered around the question of identity and around a

* See Robert P. Jones, public discussion at the Brookings Institution, February 8, 2023, available at www.youtube.com/live/rZLpF-w8-lE.

> new wave of right-wing identity politics. In this context, national populists often paint themselves as staunch defenders of the Christian West, while remaining distanced from Christian beliefs, values and institutions. In fact, national populist movements seem to have capitalized on the accelerating secularization of the white working class by openly combining ethnocultural references to Christian heritage and symbols (rather than Christian beliefs) with secular policy stances on issues like immigration, church-state relations, and religious freedom. These developments suggest a significant political shift in Western societies, where the old faith-driven religious right is gradually being replaced by a new identitarian and populist right that is much more secular in nature and may—through its culturalized uses of Christian symbols—be not just a symptom but also a harbinger of secularization. . . . Rather than being dominated by religiously defined culture wars, the new right is increasingly driven by a more secular but no less radical identitarian struggle for Western Civilization: a godless crusade in which Christianity is turned into a secularized "Christianism," an ethno-cultural identifier of the nation and a symbol of whiteness that is increasingly independent of Christian practice, beliefs and the institution of the church.

As Cremer's analysis implies, a second point of concern is this group's tenuous attachment to liberal pluralism—and its influence in the Republican Party. A survey in 2022 by the pollsters Shibley Telhami of the University of Maryland and Stella Rouse of Arizona State University showed that 61 percent of Republicans, and 78 percent of Republican evangelicals, support declaring the United States a Christian nation—even

though most acknowledged that doing so would violate the Constitution.*

Jesus and James (Madison)

One should not exaggerate the dangers of Christian nationalism. Its hard-core versions don't have wide support, and polls like the ones I have cited, which test attitudes about abstract claims, can be over-interpreted to sweep in millions of Americans who are not temperamentally or ideologically extreme. Dwelling too much on Christian nationalism may overshadow the bigger concern, which is that Sharp Christianity—the partisan, polarized, fearful style of Christianity I am concerned with here—is inimical to liberal democracy not because it is too nationalistic but because it is insufficiently Christian.

Consider again James Alison's three pillars of Christianity: *don't be afraid; imitate Jesus; forgive each other.* They all have close parallels in liberalism's core civic values.

Don't be afraid. The injunction not to be fearful is a marvelous Christian innovation, not just theologically but also psychologically. "Fear is a powerful drug," the philosopher and psychologist David Livingstone Smith has said. "We respond to fear much more than we respond to love or compassion."† Jesus and Paul understood that if you make people scared enough, you can get them to do anything, including things

* Shibley Telhami and Stella Rouse, *Study of U.S. Public Views on the Ukraine War and on Race, Ethnicity, and Religion,* University of Maryland Critical Issues Poll Study No. 10, undated. See also Rouse and Telhami, "Most Republicans Support Declaring the United States a Christian Nation," *Politico Magazine,* September 21, 2022.

† David Livingstone Smith, podcast conversation with Stephen Bradford Long, July 14, 2023, available at stephenbradfordlong.com/2023/07/14/sacred-tension-making-monsters-david-livingstone-smith/.

which are depraved and self-defeating; but if your faith helps you to focus on what is lasting and important, you will make wiser and more ethical choices. Sharp Christianity whips up exactly the kind of perpetual paranoia which Jesus so inspiringly renounced. "Fear," writes the journalist and former evangelical Jon Ward in his memoir *Testimony: Inside the Evangelical Movement That Failed a Generation,* "drove us to withdraw and retreat from dialogue and cooperation with others who were not like-minded. Fear would drive us to abandon our principles, to seek safety and protection at almost any cost, no matter who it hurt or how it reflected on our faith."

Liberal democracy, too, must guard against fear. Though realistic about human flaws (as Madison wrote: "If men were angels, no government would be necessary"), liberalism relies, more than any other system, on trust: in institutions, in individuals, in rules. Demagogues and tyrants know this, which is why their first step in destroying democracy is to whip up fear: of subversives, foreigners, Jews, Muslims, homosexuals, immigrants, the left, the right, the other political party—whatever works. No one who understands the demagogic value of fear was surprised when Trump began his presidency with a paranoid screed against "American carnage" and ended it by inciting the very mayhem he had foretold.

Liberalism requires us to share power and sometimes relinquish it. It requires us to keep faith with the Constitution even when we aren't winning. It thus requires us to overcome our political fears and approach politics in a spirit of courageous mutuality. The Church of Fear does the opposite. It adheres to political apocalypticism: every election is "Flight 93," a last stand against an existential threat. If the other side wins, then America ceases to be America, and the very survival of Christian witness is in the balance. One pastor I talked to said, "Threat is the dominant relationship with the world outside.

The world is dangerous and threatening, therefore we must defend ourselves. A lot of what I see is the same sort of toxic political vision that I see in other communities, and I want something different for the Christian church." Because it militates against trust and instills hysteria, the Church of Fear is every bit as toxic to democratic civic life as it is to Christianity.

Imitate Jesus. For all the blots on Christendom's historical record, the example of Jesus planted a seed without which liberalism might not have blossomed. With his concern for the downtrodden and his contempt for status and power (including, ultimately, his own), Jesus taught that humans have equal intrinsic worth. In God's eyes, all men and women are precious as ends in themselves, never merely useful as objects for manipulation.

Liberalism embodies these same principles of intrinsic moral worth and equality. Even in extremis, it draws back from measures like torture, enslavement, ethnic cleansing, caste distinctions, and racial discrimination—measures which were standard procedures until liberalism came along. Recall the foundational injunction of Immanuel Kant, liberalism's greatest ethicist: "Act so as to treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of another, at all times also as an end, and not only as a means." His categorical imperative requires all of us, great and small, to live under the rules we set for others. Adam Smith, in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments,* grounds morality in what he calls *sympathy,* a conscientious effort to put ourselves in others' shoes and have moral empathy for them before making choices which might affect them. In its ethics, liberal morality echoes Jesus: "As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me."

Perhaps the most disturbing thing I have heard from evangelical pastors is that their politicized parishioners put *winning*—or at least *fighting*—ahead of imitating Jesus. As my

west Texas pastor friend said, "Everyone says the ends justify the means, but the means are really important." Another pastor told me, "There's this sense that ends justify means, and less faith in the norms of a constitutional democracy as something worth protecting and defending even if it means they might not always win on policy." The battlefield mindset is as toxic to democracy as it is to Christianity.

Forgive each other. "Father," said Jesus, "forgive them; for they know not what they do." Even in childhood, I thought it was amazing that Jesus asked forgiveness for his tormenters, though they had done nothing to deserve it. I understood that building an entire moral system on forgiveness—on *undeserved* forgiveness, what Christians call *grace*—was a radical, visionary, transformational idea.

Liberalism has core ideas which, while not the same as forgiveness and grace, map onto them: *forbearance, civility,* and *compromise.* Forbearance (perhaps the most undervalued of the liberal virtues) requires that when we win in politics, we resist the temptation to drive our adversaries out of public life. We do not strip them of their lives, their votes, their voices, their livings, or their social positions—all of which illiberal regimes do routinely. We forbear because we know they may someday have power over us; but more importantly because they are our fellow citizens, our civic brethren. This was the spirit Lincoln invoked in his first inaugural address, when he said, "We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection." He understood that when politics becomes war, constitutional democracy dies.

Civility is important for the same reason—meaning not just being polite but resolving to hear out our political opponents and treat them as we would wish to be treated. As Alexandra Hudson writes in her 2023 book *The Soul of Civility,* "Ci-

vility is a disposition, a way of seeing others as beings endowed with dignity and inherently valuable," a way of conduct which "sees other persons as our moral equals and worthy of basic respect."

And, of course, there is compromise: the essential purpose of the Constitution itself. Liberal regimes reject domination and embrace *negotiation*. The Constitution enshrines a permanent negotiation between branches of government, levels of government, and factions; no one accomplishes much without compromising, and that's the whole point. As I have argued elsewhere, compromise is not just the splitting of differences; it is a dynamic, creative force in its own right, constantly recruiting new voices and ideas to break deadlocks and solve problems. In a liberal democracy, nothing else works without it.*

The Constitution cannot ask us to forgive each other, much less to show grace; but asking us to practice forbearance, civility, and compromise has much the same effect. When Christians take up a spirit of grievance and vengeance, they take aim at liberal democracy. When a pastor calls on Christians to "quit being passive and start being aggressive" and "to fight fire with fire"—and when a theologian declares, "No longer will being nice and relevant cut it"—they are not speaking the language of Jesus *or* of James Madison.

Because Sharp Christianity betrays those three tenets, *don't be afraid, imitate Jesus,* and *forgive each other,* it is un-Christian, and because it is un-Christian in those respects, it is also illiberal. It is not merely in tension with healthy democratic values; it actively undermines them. When American Christians throw in their lot with the MAGA movement, they are joining a movement which was very accurately described

* See Jonathan Rauch, "Rescuing Compromise," *National Affairs,* Fall 2013.

(by President Joe Biden) as *semi-fascist*. True, MAGA lacks certain characteristic elements of twentieth-century European-style fascism: militarism, totalism, explicit racism and anti-semitism. Yet there are many other elements of fascism which MAGA emulates. Rejection of elections? *Check.* Contempt for law? *Check.* Corrupt use of government power? *Check.* Nostalgia for purer, simpler times? *Check.* Populist attacks on "enemies of the people"? *Check.* Hostility to the free press? *Check.* Fear of a cosmopolitan, globally subversive left? *Check.* Fear of ethnic and cultural "replacement"? *Check.* Race-baiting and immigrant-bashing? *Check.* Extreme nationalism? *Check.* Cult of masculinity? *Check.* Cult of personality? *Check.* Bully-worship? *Check.* Admiration for authoritarians? *Check.* Violent and dehumanizing rhetoric? *Check.* Threats, harassment, intimidation? *Check.* Militia and street thugs? *Check.* MAGA may not be the full Mussolini, but it gets at least halfway there.

In other countries, we have seen again and again how bad the results can be when authoritarian politicians co-opt conservative churches. Think Italy, Germany, Russia. America is not immune. Mediated through the likes of MAGA, Christianity's crisis of spiritual formation becomes democracy's crisis of civic formation.

A Crisis of Authority

Spiritual formation is a term I had not encountered before starting work on this book. But I soon found I couldn't turn a corner without bumping into it. Very often, it was conjoined with the word *crisis*. As one pastor I interviewed said, "I think it's a spiritual formation crisis. Secular influences are spiritually forming Christians." Andrew Hanauer, an evangelical convert who leads the One America Movement, a faith-based nonprofit, told me, "The fundamental challenge in Christian

parlance is of spiritual formation." When I asked him to explain, he replied that we are all formed morally and spiritually by something, and for Christians that something is supposed to be the Bible. "Pastors describe that, more and more, their congregants are formed by a political and cultural view and then hold the church up against that."

As I emphasized earlier, the problem is not that conservative Christians have turned mean or ungenerous in their personal lives. In a podcast, Jon Ward drew an important distinction. "One of the conclusions I've come to . . . is that a lot of the evangelical churches do a pretty good job of discipling their members in private character and private virtue within the family. . . . Broadly, evangelicals are virtuous people in their homes and in their local communities. But they have not been discipled in how to exercise *public* character or *public* virtue."*

I spoke earlier of a new wall of separation, a discontinuity between Christians' personal and political behavior. That is what Ward means by the failure of discipleship in public character; it is what David French and other Christians are getting at when they bemoan Christians' failure to show the humility and kindness on social media and in politics which they practice in their church lives. It is what the Christian writer and activist Michael Wear is getting at when he writes, in his 2024 book *The Spirit of Our Politics: Spiritual Formation and the Renovation of Public Life,* that "our culture, our churches, and many, many individuals—Christians and others—have a view of a domesticated, personalized, and privatized Jesus who is simply not up to the task of our greatest public challenges. We,

*Jon Ward, "Paul D. Miller Untangles the Confusion around Christian Nationalism," October 28, 2022, available at toppodcast.com/podcast_feeds/the-long-game/.

as individuals and as a culture, often do not trust that Christianity has credible resources that are valuable for our public and political lives. We take great pride in our doctrinal acumen, our 'high view' of this or that, while we act as practical atheists in our public life."

As I have said before, secular liberalism and Christianity have separate purposes. They do not need to *ally* (and should not); but they do need to *align,* at least well enough so that democracy's wheels don't come off. Secular liberals cannot expect pastors to deliver civics lectures from the pulpit; in fact, too many pulpits are too politicized already. But we *can* expect the church to disciple its flock in those core Christian teachings which also undergird our democracy. Even accepting that Christianity's accountability is to God, not the U.S. Constitution, we are still obliged to ask: what does *God* think is Christianity's relationship to the Constitution? And it is fair for us to point out that Jesus's teachings have some direct implications on this score.

In that respect, we seculars are entitled to hold the church accountable to the democracy of which it is part. We are entitled to hold it accountable for the choices it makes. While the church's relationship with God is its own business, secular Americans are justified in reminding our Christian friends that the Church of Fear is toxic for them and for us. We are not out of our lane to suggest that what Russell Moore calls "confident Christianity"—which "constantly reminds us that this life is less important than the next [and] demonstrates something of what it means to forgive and serve one another"—needs repair for all our sakes.* In short, we have standing to hope, perhaps even insist, that Christians get their act together.

*Moore, "When the South Loosens Its Bible Belt."

In doing so, we are not asking Christianity to be anything other than itself. We are asking that it eschew fear, imitate Jesus, and forgive—thereby keeping its commitments to God *and* liberal democracy. Michael Wear makes this point eloquently: "The Christian's responsibility for our politics is special, but not because Christians are or should be privileged by law or because America is a 'Christian nation.' For too long, Christians have asserted special status for this country, all while avoiding special responsibility. We share with our fellow citizens—Christians and others—the responsibility in and for our politics in the eyes of the law. Yet Christians are also called by God to be a blessing to the cities and nations in which we've been placed."

Can the church meet that calling? These days, when the Church of Fear seems so strong, pessimism abounds. In *Christianity's American Fate*, David Hollinger passes a gloomy judgment on the evangelical church's relationship with democracy. "Christianity," he writes, "has become an instrument for the most politically, culturally, and theologically reactionary Americans. By any measure, evangelical Protestant leaders have done much more than overzealous progressives to create and shape today's crisis of democracy."

Yet I am not sure that evangelical Protestant *leaders*, whatever their mistakes in the past, are the main problem today. Though some have a lot to answer for, Sharp Christianity appears to be primarily a crisis of followership. Politicization seems to be flowing from the pews to the pulpit more than the other way around. All the pastors I spoke with are unhappy with the partisan tensions and eruptions they see in their churches. Still less are they comfortable with the ebbing of their spiritual authority. They feel dragged along. As one told me, "Pastors are being taken off guard by how politically polarized and radicalized some members of their congregations are. The majority are surprised by it."

The crisis of spiritual formation is foremost a crisis of pastoral authority, not of pastoral influence. As Kristin Du Mez told me, "Many leaders have been rudely awakened to the limits of their own influence, their own power, in their own churches. They thought they could open scripture and have influence. They're finding that if their teaching runs counter to right-wing Republican talking points or Fox News or Tucker Carlson, they'll be up against the ropes, not necessarily by their entire church but by a strong faction within their church." Describing the demoralization so many pastors feel, she told me, "It's this feeling of emptiness, that they have no standing if they run up against this political agenda."

Increasingly, in white Protestant America, divisions run *through* churches, not between them. Some churches have split over their political differences; in others, persistent hard-liners drive out the less politicized, possibly including the pastor. Either way, as schisms and purges run their course, the church becomes both sharper and weaker: more politically divisive and less spiritually fulfilling. Both trends endanger liberal democracy.

They are not easy to reverse. The pews, Du Mez points out, are taking cues from politicians and evangelical media—radio, TV, music labels, and publishers which sell the gospel of fear. "They are all politicized," she said. "That's where the money is, and the gatekeepers are watching that very closely. So it's not that if Trump dies, everyone recalibrates and goes in a different direction. You have to undo these whole systems and replace them with something else, and I don't know what that would be."

Well . . . that is a pretty grim scenario. Still, and thank-

fully, a whole lot of Christians are unhappy with it. We may wonder if dismayed pastors and battle-weary parishioners—the "church within the church"—can find a better path. For there *are* better paths: ones which integrate scriptural teachings and liberal values, which align spiritual formation with civic virtue, and which, far from being pie in the sky, are flourishing right now.

3
Thick Christianity
The Gospel of Compromise
There are many ways to reconcile Jesus with James Madison

In November 2021, an elderly man, thin and with a dignified demeanor leavened by an impish smile, traveled from Salt Lake City to the University of Virginia with an urgent message. Wasting little time on pleasantries, he launched straight into his theme. "I love this country, which I believe was established with the blessings of God. I love its Constitution, whose principles I believe were divinely inspired. I am, therefore, distressed at the way we are handling the national issues that divide us."

In expressing his distress, he was not speaking merely for himself. This was Dallin Oaks, first counselor in the First Presidency of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Then almost 90, he had been a successful lawyer, a justice of the Utah state supreme court, and president of Brigham Young University. Called to the First Presidency in 2018, he was next in line to succeed Russell M. Nelson, the church's president and prophet; and he had become the public voice of the church's civic theology.

A civic theology posits that God expects his people to act