

The Last Temptation

This essay by Michael Gerson was published in the April 2018 issue of *The Atlantic Monthly*. The prominent evangelical writer explains how his movement lost its way and fell hard for Donald Trump. This blog posting was copied from the magazine's website.

One of the most extraordinary things about our current politics—really, one of the most extraordinary developments of recent political history—is the loyal adherence of religious conservatives to Donald Trump. The president won four-fifths of the votes of white evangelical Christians. This was a higher level of support than either Ronald Reagan or George W. Bush, an outspoken evangelical himself, ever received.

Trump's background and beliefs could hardly be more incompatible with traditional Christian models of life and leadership. Trump's past political stances (he once supported the right to partial-birth abortion), his character (he has bragged about sexually assaulting women), and even his language (he introduced the words pussy and shithole into presidential discourse) would more naturally lead religious conservatives toward exorcism than alliance. This is a man who has cruelly publicized his infidelities, made disturbing sexual comments about his elder daughter, and boasted about the size

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of his penis on the debate stage. His lawyer reportedly arranged a \$130,000 payment to a porn star to dissuade her from disclosing an alleged affair. Yet religious conservatives who once blanched at PG-13 public standards now yawn at such NC-17 maneuvers. We are a long way from *The Book of Virtues*.

Trump supporters tend to dismiss moral scruples about his behavior as squeamishness over the president's "style." But the problem is the distinctly non-Christian substance of his values. Trump's unapologetic materialism—his equation of financial and social success with human achievement and worth—is a negation of Christian teaching. His tribalism and hatred for "the other" stand in direct opposition to Jesus's radical ethic of neighbor love. Trump's strength-worship and contempt for "losers" smack more of Nietzsche than of Christ. Blessed are the proud. Blessed are the ruthless. Blessed are the shameless. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after fame.

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And yet, a credible case can be made that evangelical votes were a decisive factor in Trump's improbable victory. Trump himself certainly acts as if he believes they were. Many individuals, causes, and groups that Trump pledged to champion have been swiftly sidelined or sacrificed during Trump's brief presidency. The administration's

outreach to white evangelicals, however, has been utterly consistent.

Trump-allied religious leaders have found an open door at the White House—what Richard Land, the president of the Southern Evangelical Seminary, calls “unprecedented access.” In return, they have rallied behind the administration in its times of need. “Clearly, this Russian story is nonsense,” explains the mega-church pastor Paula White-Cain, who is not generally known as a legal or cybersecurity expert. Pastor David Jeremiah has compared Jared Kushner and Ivanka Trump to Joseph and Mary: “It’s just like God to use a young Jewish couple to help Christians.” According to Jerry Falwell Jr., evangelicals have “found their dream president,” which says something about the current quality of evangelical dreams.

Loyalty to Trump has involved progressively more difficult, self-abasing demands. And there appears to be no limit to what some evangelical leaders will endure. Figures such as Falwell and Franklin Graham followed Trump’s lead in supporting Judge Roy Moore in the December Senate election in Alabama. These are religious leaders who have spent their entire adult lives bemoaning cultural and moral decay. Yet they publicly backed a candidate who was repeatedly accused of sexual misconduct, including with a 14-year-old girl.

In January, following reports that Trump had referred to Haiti and African nations as “shithole countries,” Pastor Robert Jeffress came quickly to his defense. “Apart from the vocabulary attributed to him,” Jeffress wrote, “President Trump is right on target in his sentiment.” After reports emerged that Trump’s lawyer paid hush money to the porn star Stormy Daniels to cover up their alleged sexual encounter, Graham vouched for Trump’s “concern for Christian values.” Tony Perkins, the president of the Family Research Council, argued that Trump should be given a “mulligan” for his past infidelity. One can only imagine the explosion of outrage if President Barack Obama had been credibly accused of similar offenses.

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The moral convictions of many evangelical leaders have become a function of their partisan identification. This is not mere gullibility; it is utter corruption. Blinded by political tribalism and hatred for their political opponents, these leaders can’t see how they are undermining the causes to which they once dedicated their lives. Little remains of a

distinctly Christian public witness.

As the prominent evangelical pastor Tim Keller—who is not a Trump loyalist—recently wrote in *The New Yorker*, “ ‘Evangelical’ used to denote people who claimed the high moral ground; now, in popular usage, the word is nearly synonymous with ‘hypocrite.’ ” So it is little wonder that last year the Princeton Evangelical Fellowship, an 87-year-old ministry, dropped the “E word” from its name, becoming the Princeton Christian Fellowship: Too many students had identified the term with

conservative political ideology. Indeed, a number of serious evangelicals are distancing themselves from the word for similar reasons.

I find this desire understandable but not compelling. Some words, like strategic castles, are worth defending, and evangelical is among them. While the term is notoriously difficult to define, it certainly encompasses a “born-again” religious experience, a commitment to the authority of the Bible, and an emphasis on the redemptive power of Jesus Christ.

I was raised in an evangelical home, went to an evangelical church and high school, and began following Christ as a teen. After attending Georgetown University for a year, I transferred to Wheaton College in Illinois—sometimes called “the Harvard of evangelical Protestantism”—where I studied theology. I worked at an evangelical nonprofit, Prison Fellowship, before becoming a staffer for Senator Dan Coats of Indiana (a fellow Wheaton alum). On Capitol Hill, I found many evangelical partners in trying to define a “compassionate conservatism.” And as a policy adviser and the chief speechwriter to President George W. Bush, I saw how evangelical leaders such as Rick and Kay Warren could be principled, tireless advocates in the global fight against aids.

Those experiences make me hesitant to abandon the word evangelical. They also make seeing the defilement of that word all the more painful. The corruption of a political party is regrettable. The corruption of a religious tradition by politics is tragic, shaming those who participate in it.

How did something so important and admirable become so disgraced? For many people, including myself, this question involves both intellectual analysis and personal angst. The answer extends back some 150 years, and involves cultural and political shifts that long pre-date Donald Trump. It is the story of how an influential and culturally confident religious movement became a marginalized and anxious minority seeking political protection under the wing of a man such as Trump, the least traditionally Christian figure—in temperament, behavior, and evident belief—to assume the presidency in living memory.

Understanding that evolution requires understanding the values that once animated American evangelicalism. It is a movement that was damaged in the fall from a great height.

My alma mater, Wheaton College, was founded by abolitionist evangelicals in 1860 under the leadership of Jonathan Blanchard, an emblematic figure in mid-19th-century Northern evangelicalism. Blanchard was part of a generation of radical malcontents produced by the Second Great Awakening, a religious revival that had touched millions of American lives in the first half of the 19th century. He was a Presbyterian minister, a founder of several radical newspapers, and an antislavery agitator.

In the years before the Civil War, a connection between moralism and a concern for social justice was generally assumed among Northern evangelicals. They variously militated for temperance, humane treatment of the mentally disabled, and prison reform. But mainly they militated for the end of slavery. Indeed, Wheaton welcomed both African American and female students, and served as a stop on the Underground Railroad. In a history of the 39th Regiment of the Illinois Volunteer Infantry, the

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infantryman Ezra Cook recalled that “runaway slaves were perfectly safe in the College building, even when no attempt was made to conceal their presence.”

Blanchard had explained his beliefs in an 1839 commencement address given at Oberlin College, titled “A Perfect State of Society.” He preached that

“every true minister of Christ is a universal reformer, whose business it is, so far as possible, to reform all the evils which press on human concerns.” Elsewhere he argued that “slave-holding is not a solitary, but a social sin.” He added: “I rest my opposition to slavery upon the one-bloodism of the New Testament. All men are equal, because they are of one equal blood.”

During this period, evangelicalism was largely identical to mainstream Protestantism. Evangelicals varied widely in their denominational beliefs, but they uniformly agreed about the need for a personal decision to accept God’s grace through faith in Christ. The evangelist Charles G. Finney, who was the president of Oberlin College from 1851 to 1866, described his conversion experience thusly: “I could feel the impression, like a wave of electricity, going through and through me. Indeed it seemed to come in waves and waves of liquid love.”

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In politics, evangelicals tended to identify New England, and then the whole country, with biblical Israel. Many a sermon described America as a place set apart for divine purposes. “Some nation,” the evangelical minister Lyman Beecher said, “itself free, was needed, to blow the trumpet and hold up the light.” (Beecher’s daughter

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Harriet Beecher Stowe was among the founders of this magazine.) The burden of this calling was a collective responsibility to remain virtuous, in matters from ending slavery to ending Sabbath-breaking.

This was not advocacy for theocracy, and evangelical leaders were not blind to the risks of too close a relationship with worldly power. “The

injudicious association of religion with politics, in the time of Cromwell,” Beecher argued, “brought upon evangelical doctrine and piety, in England, an odium which has

not ceased to this day.” Yet few evangelicals would have denied that God’s covenantal relationship with America required a higher standard of private and public morality, lest that divine blessing be forfeited.

Perhaps most important, prior to the Civil War, evangelicals were by and large postmillennialists—that is, they believed that the final millennium of human history would be a time of peace for the world and of expansion for the Christian Church, culminating in the Second Coming of Christ. As such, they were an optimistic lot who thought that human effort could help hasten the arrival of this promised era—a belief that encouraged both social activism and global missionary activity. “Evangelicals generally regarded almost any sort of progress as evidence of the advance of the kingdom,” the historian George Marsden observes in *Fundamentalism and American Culture*.

In the mid-19th century, evangelicalism was the predominant religious tradition in America—a faith assured of its social position, confident in its divine calling, welcoming of progress, and hopeful about the future. Fifty years later, it was losing intellectual and social ground on every front. Twenty-five years beyond that, it had become a national joke.

The horrors of the Civil War took a severe toll on the social optimism at the heart of postmillennialism. It was harder to believe in the existence of a religious golden age that included Antietam. At the same time, industrialization and urbanization loosened traditional social bonds and created an impression of moral chaos. The mass immigration of Catholics and Jews changed the face and spiritual self-conception of the country. (In 1850, Catholics made up about 5 percent of the population. By 1906, they represented 17 percent.) Evangelicals struggled to envision a diverse, and some believed degenerate, America as the chosen, godly republic of their imagination.

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But it was a series of momentous intellectual developments that most effectively drove a wedge between evangelicalism and elite culture. Higher criticism of the Bible—a scholarly movement out of Germany that picked apart the human sources and development of ancient texts—called into question the roots, accuracy,

and historicity of the book that constituted the ultimate source of evangelical authority. At the same time, the theory of evolution advanced a new account of human origin. Advocates of evolution, as well as those who denied it most vigorously, took the theory as an alternative to religious accounts—and in many cases to Christian belief itself.

Religious progressives sought common ground between the Christian faith and the new science and higher criticism. Many combined their faith with the Social Gospel—a postmillennialism drained of the miraculous, with social reform taking the

place of the Second Coming.

Religious conservatives, by contrast, rebelled against this strategy of accommodation in a series of firings and heresy trials designed to maintain control of seminaries. (Woodrow Wilson's uncle James lost his job at Columbia Theological Seminary for accepting evolution as compatible with the Bible.) But these tactics generally backfired, and seminary after seminary, college after college, fell under the influence of modern scientific and cultural assumptions. To contest progressive ideas, the religiously orthodox published a series of books called *The Fundamentals*. Hence the term fundamentalism, conceived in a spirit of desperate reaction.

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Fundamentalism embraced traditional religious views, but it did not propose a return to an older evangelicalism. Instead it responded to modernity in ways that cut it off from its own past. In reacting against higher criticism, it became simplistic and

overliteral in its reading of scripture. In reacting against evolution, it became anti-scientific in its general orientation. In reacting against the Social Gospel, it came to regard the whole concept of social justice as a dangerous liberal idea. This last point constituted what some scholars have called the "Great Reversal," which took place from about 1900 to 1930. "All progressive social concern," Marsden writes, "whether political or private, became suspect among revivalist evangelicals and was relegated to a very minor role."

This general pessimism about the direction of society was reflected in a shift away from postmillennialism and toward premillennialism. In this view, the current age is tending not toward progress, but rather toward decadence and chaos under the influence of Satan. A new and better age will not be inaugurated until the Second Coming of Christ, who is the only one capable of cleaning up the mess. No amount of human effort can hasten that day, or ultimately save a doomed world. For this reason, social activism was deemed irrelevant to the most essential task: the work of preparing oneself, and helping others prepare, for final judgment.

The banishment of fundamentalism from the cultural mainstream culminated dramatically in a Tennessee courthouse in 1925. William Jennings Bryan, the most prominent Christian politician of his time, was set against Clarence Darrow and the theory of evolution at the Scopes "monkey trial," in which a Tennessee educator was tried for teaching the theory in high school. Bryan won the case but not the country. The journalist and critic H. L. Mencken provided the account accepted by history, dismissing Bryan as "a tin pot pope in the Coca-Cola belt and a brother to the forlorn pastors who belabor half-wits in galvanized iron tabernacles behind the railroad yards." Fundamentalists became comic figures, subject to world-class condescension.

It has largely slipped the mind of history that Bryan was a peace activist as secretary of state under Woodrow Wilson and that his politics foreshadowed the New Deal. And Mencken was eventually revealed as a racist, an anti-Semite, and a eugenics advocate. In the fundamentalist–modernist controversy, there was only one winner. “In the course of roughly thirty-five years,” the sociologist James Davison Hunter observes in *American Evangelicalism*, “Protestantism had moved from a position of cultural dominance to a position of cognitive marginality and political impotence.” Activism and optimism were replaced by the festering resentment of status lost.

The fundamentalists were not passive in their exile. They created a web of institutions—radio stations, religious schools, outreach ministries—that eventually constituted a healthy subculture. The country, meanwhile, was becoming less secular and more welcoming of religious influence. (In 1920, church membership in the United States was 43 percent. By 1960, it was 63 percent.) A number of leaders, including the theologian Carl Henry and the evangelist Billy Graham (the father of Franklin Graham), bridled at fundamentalist irrelevance. Henry’s book *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism* was influential in urging greater cultural and intellectual engagement. This reemergence found its fullest expression in Graham, who left the fundamentalist ghetto, hobnobbed with presidents, and presented to the public a more appealing version of evangelicalism—a term that was deliberately employed as a contrast to the older, narrower fundamentalism.

Not everyone was impressed. When Graham planned mass evangelistic meetings in New York City in 1957, the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr editorialized against his “petty moralizing.” But Niebuhr’s attack on Graham provoked significant backlash, even in liberal theological circles. During a 16-week “crusade” that played to packed houses, Graham was joined one night at Madison Square Garden by none other than Martin Luther King Jr.

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Over time, evangelicalism got a revenge of sorts in its historical rivalry with liberal Christianity. Adherents of the latter gradually found better things to do with their Sundays than attend progressive services. In 1972, nearly 28 percent of the population belonged to mainline-Protestant churches. That figure is now well below 15 percent. Over those four decades, however, evangelicals held steady at roughly 25 percent of the public (though this share has recently declined). As its old theological rival faded—or, more accurately, collapsed—evangelical endurance felt a lot like momentum.

With the return of this greater institutional self-confidence, evangelicals might have expected to play a larger role in determining cultural norms and standards. But

their hopes ran smack into the sexual revolution, along with other rapid social changes. The Moral Majority appeared at about the same time that the actual majority was more and more comfortable with divorce and couples living together out of wedlock. Evangelicals experienced the power of growing numbers and healthy subcultural institutions even as elite institutions—from universities to courts to Hollywood—were decisively rejecting traditional ideals.

As a result, the primary evangelical political narrative is adversarial, an angry tale about the aggression of evangelicalism’s cultural rivals. In a remarkably free country, many evangelicals view their rights as fragile, their institutions as threatened, and their dignity as assailed. The single largest religious demographic in the United States—representing about half the Republican political coalition—sees itself as a besieged and disrespected minority. In this way, evangelicals have become simultaneously more engaged and more alienated.

The overall political disposition of evangelical politics has remained decidedly conservative, and also decidedly reactive. After shamefully sitting out (or even opposing) the civil-rights movement, white evangelicals became activated on a limited range of issues. They defended Christian schools against regulation during Jimmy Carter’s administration. They fought against Supreme Court decisions that put tight restrictions on school prayer and removed many state limits on abortion. The sociologist Nathan Glazer describes such efforts as a “defensive offensive”—a kind of morally indignant pushback against a modern world that, in evangelicals’ view, had grown hostile and oppressive.

This attitude was happily exploited by the modern GOP. Evangelicals who were alienated by the pro-choice secularism of Democratic presidential nominees were effectively courted to join the Reagan coalition. “I know that you can’t endorse me,” Reagan told an evangelical conference in 1980, “but I only brought that up because I want you to know that I endorse you.” In contrast, during his presidential run four years later, Walter Mondale warned of “radical preachers,” and his running mate,

Geraldine Ferraro, denounced the “extremists who control the Republican Party.” By attacking evangelicals, the Democratic Party left them with a relatively easy partisan choice.

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The leaders who had emerged within evangelicalism varied significantly in tone and approach. Billy Graham was the uncritical priest to the powerful. (His inclination to please was

memorialized on one of the Nixon tapes, in comments enabling the president’s anti-Semitism.) James Dobson, the founder of Focus on the Family, was the prickly prophet, constantly threatening to bolt from the Republican coalition unless social-conservative purity was maintained. Jerry Falwell Sr. and Pat Robertson (the

latter of whom ran for president himself in 1988) tried to be political kingmakers. And, following his dramatic conversion, Chuck Colson, of Watergate infamy, founded Prison Fellowship in an attempt to revive some of the old abolitionist spirit as an advocate of prison reform. Yet much of this variety was blurred in the public mind, with religious right used as a catchall epithet.

Where did this history leave evangelicals' political involvement?

For a start, modern evangelicalism has an important intellectual piece missing. It lacks a model or ideal of political engagement—an organizing theory of social action. Over the same century from Blanchard to Falwell, Catholics developed a coherent, comprehensive tradition of social and political reflection. Catholic social thought includes a commitment to solidarity, whereby justice in a society is measured by the treatment of its weakest and most vulnerable members. And it incorporates the principle of subsidiarity—the idea that human needs are best met by small and local institutions (though higher-order institutions have a moral responsibility to intervene when local ones fail).

In practice, this acts as an “if, then” requirement for Catholics, splendidly complicating their politics: If you want to call yourself pro-life on abortion, then you have to oppose the dehumanization of migrants. If you criticize the devaluation of life by euthanasia, then you must criticize the devaluation of life by racism. If you want to be regarded as pro-family, then you have to support access to health care. And vice versa. The doctrinal whole requires a broad, consistent view of justice, which—when it is faithfully applied—cuts across the categories and clichés of American politics. Of course, American Catholics routinely ignore Catholic social thought. But at least they have it. Evangelicals lack a similar tradition of their own to disregard.

So where do evangelicals get their theory of social engagement? It is cheating to say (as most evangelicals probably would) “the Bible.” The Christian Bible, after all, can be a vexing document: At various points, it offers approving accounts of genocide and recommends the stoning of insubordinate children. Some interpretive theory must elevate the Golden Rule above Iron Age ethics and apply that higher ideal to the tragic compromises of public life. Lacking an equivalent to Catholic social thought, many evangelicals seem to find their theory merely by following the contours of the political movement that is currently defending, and exploiting, them. The voter guides of religious conservatives have often been suspiciously similar to the political priorities of movement conservatism. Fox News and talk radio are vastly greater influences on evangelicals' political identity than formal statements by religious denominations or from the National Association of Evangelicals. In this Christian political movement, Christian theology is emphatically not the primary motivating factor.

Evolution is a fact. It is objectively true based on overwhelming evidence. By denying this, evangelicals made their entire view of reality suspect. They were insisting, in effect, that the Christian faith requires a flight from reason.

The evangelical political agenda, moreover, has been narrowed by its supremely reactive nature. Rather than choosing their own agendas, evangelicals have been pulled into a series of social and political debates started by others. Why the asinine issue of spiritually barren prayer in public schools? Because of Justice Hugo Black's 1962 opinion rendering it unconstitutional. Why such an effort-wasting emphasis on a constitutional amendment to end abortion, which will never pass? Because in 1973 Justice Harry Blackmun located the right to abortion in the constitutional penumbra. Why the current emphasis on religious liberty? Because the 2015 Obergefell v. Hodges decision legalizing same-sex marriage has raised fears of coercion.

It is not that secularization, abortion, and religious liberty are trivial issues; they are extremely important. But the timing and emphasis of evangelical responses have contributed to a broad sense that evangelical political engagement is negative, censorious, and oppositional. This funneled focus has also created the damaging impression that Christians are obsessed with sex. Much of the secular public hears from Christians only on issues of sexuality—from contraceptive mandates to gay rights to transgender bathroom usage. And while religious people do believe that sexual ethics are important, the nature of contemporary religious engagement creates a misimpression about just how important they are relative to other crucial issues.

The upside potential of evangelical social engagement was illustrated by an important, but largely overlooked, initiative that I witnessed while working at the White House. The President's Emergency Plan for aids Relief (pepfar)—the largest initiative by a nation in history to fight a single disease—emerged in part from a sense of moral obligation informed by George W. Bush's evangelical faith. In explaining and defending the program, Bush made constant reference to Luke 12:48: "To whom much is given, much is required." pefpar also owes its existence to a strange-bedfellows political alliance of liberal global-health advocates and evangelical leaders, who had particular standing and sway with Republican members of Congress. Rather than being a response to secular aggression, this form of evangelical social engagement was the reaction to a massive humanitarian need and displayed a this-worldly emphasis on social justice that helped save millions of lives.

This achievement is now given little attention by secular liberals or religious conservatives. In the Trump era, evangelical leaders have seldom brought this type of issue to the policy front burner—though some have tried with criminal-justice reform and the fight against modern slavery. Individual Christians and evangelical ministries fight preventable disease, resettle refugees, treat addiction, run homeless shelters, and care for foster children. But such concerns find limited collective political expression.

Part of the reason such matters are not higher on the evangelical agenda is surely the relative ethnic and racial insularity of many white evangelicals. Plenty of African Americans hold evangelical theological views, of course, along with a growing number of Latinos. Yet evangelical churches, like other churches and houses of worship, tend to be segregated on Sunday. Nearly all denominations with large numbers of evangelicals are less racially diverse than the country overall.

Compare this with the Catholic Church, which is more than one-third Hispanic. This has naturally stretched the priorities of Catholicism to include the needs and rights of recent immigrants. In many evangelical communities, those needs remain distant and theoretical (though successful evangelical churches in urban areas are now experiencing the same diversity and broadening of social concern). Or consider the contrasting voting behaviors of white and African American evangelicals in last year's Senate race in Alabama. According to exit polls, 80 percent of white evangelicals voted for Roy Moore, while 95 percent of black evangelicals supported his Democratic opponent, Doug Jones. The two groups inhabit two entirely different political worlds.

Evangelicals also have a consistent problem with their public voice, which can be off-puttingly apocalyptic. "We are on the verge of losing" America, proclaims the evangelical writer and radio host Eric Metaxas, "as we could have lost it in the Civil War." Franklin Graham declares, a little too vividly, that the country "has taken a nosedive off of the moral diving board into the cesspool of humanity." Such hyperbole may be only a rhetorical strategy, employing the apocalypse for emphasis. But the attribution of depravity and decline to America also reflects a consistent and (so far) disappointed belief that the Second Coming may be just around history's corner.

The difficulty with this approach to public life—other than its insanely pessimistic depiction of our flawed but wonderful country—is that it trivializes and undercuts the entire political enterprise. Politics in a democracy is essentially anti-apocalyptic, premised on the idea that an active citizenry is capable of improving the nation. But if we're already mere minutes from the midnight hour, then what is the point? The normal avenues of political reform are useless. No amount of negotiation or compromise is going to matter much compared with the Second Coming.

Moreover, in making their case on cultural decay and decline, evangelicals have, in some highly visible cases, chosen the wrong nightmares. Most notable, they made a crucial error in picking evolution as a main point of contention with modernity. "The contest between evolution and Christianity is a duel to the death," William Jennings Bryan argued. "If evolution wins ... Christianity goes—not suddenly, of course, but gradually, for the two cannot stand together." Many people of his background believed this. But their resistance was futile, for one incontrovertible reason: Evolution is a fact. It is objectively true based on overwhelming evidence. By denying this, evangelicals made their entire view of reality suspect. They were insisting, in effect, that the Christian faith

requires a flight from reason.

This was foolish and unnecessary. There is no meaningful theological difference between creation by divine intervention and creation by natural selection; both are consistent with belief in a purposeful universe, and with serious interpretation of biblical texts. Evangelicals have placed an entirely superfluous stumbling block before their neighbors and children, encouraging every young person who loves science to reject Christianity.

What if Bryan and others of his generation had chosen to object to eugenics rather than evolution, to social Darwinism rather than Darwinism? The textbook at issue in the Scopes case, after all, was titled *A Civic Biology*, and it urged sterilization

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for the mentally impaired. "Epilepsy, and feeble-mindedness," the text read, "are handicaps which it is not only unfair but criminal to hand down to posterity." What if this had been the focus of Bryan's objection? Mencken doubtless would still have mocked. But the moral and

theological priorities of evangelical Christianity would have turned out differently. And evangelical fears would have been eventually justified by America's shameful history of eugenics, and by the more rigorous application of the practice abroad. Instead, Bryan chose evolution—and in the end, the cause of human dignity was not served by the obscuring of human origins.

The consequences, especially for younger generations, are considerable. According to a recent survey by Barna, a Christian research firm, more than half of churchgoing Christian teens believe that "the church seems to reject much of what science tells us about the world." This may be one reason that, in America, the youngest age cohorts are the least religiously affiliated, which will change the nation's baseline of religiosity over time. More than a third of Millennials say they are unaffiliated with any faith, up 10 points since 2007. Count this as an ironic achievement of religious conservatives: an overall decline in identification with religion itself.

By the turn of the millennium, many, including myself, were convinced that religious conservatism was fading as a political force. Its outsize leaders were aging and passing. Its institutions seemed to be declining in profile and influence. Bush's 2000 campaign attempted to appeal to religious voters on a new basis. "Compassionate conservatism" was designed to be a policy application of Catholic social thought—an attempt to serve the poor, homeless, and addicted by catalyzing the work of private and religious nonprofits. The effort was sincere but eventually undermined by congressional-Republican resistance and eclipsed by global crisis. Still, I believed that the old evangelical model of social engagement was exhausted, and that something more positive and principled was in the offing.

I was wrong. In fact, evangelicals would prove highly vulnerable to a message of resentful, declinist populism. Donald Trump could almost have been echoing the apocalyptic warnings of Metaxas and Graham when he declared, “Our country’s going to hell.” Or: “We haven’t seen anything like this, the carnage all over the world.” Given Trump’s general level of religious knowledge, he likely had no idea that he was adapting premillennialism to populism. But when the candidate talked of an America in decline and headed toward destruction, which could be returned to greatness only by recovering the certainties of the past, he was strumming resonant chords of evangelical conviction.

Trump consistently depicts evangelicals as they depict themselves: a mistreated minority, in need of a defender who plays by worldly rules. Christianity is “under siege,” Trump told a Liberty University audience. “Relish the opportunity to be an outsider,” he added at a later date: “Embrace the label.” Protecting Christianity, Trump essentially argues, is a job for a bully.

Whatever Trump’s policy legacy ends up being, his presidency has been a disaster in the realm of norms. It has coarsened our culture, given permission for bullying, complicated the moral formation of children, undermined standards of public integrity, and encouraged cynicism about the political enterprise.

It is true that insofar as Christian hospitals or colleges have their religious liberty threatened by hostile litigation or government agencies, they have every right to defend their institutional identities—to advocate for a principled pluralism. But this is different from evangelicals regarding themselves, hysterically and with self-pity,

as an oppressed minority that requires a strongman to rescue it. This is how Trump has invited evangelicals to view themselves. He has treated evangelicalism as an interest group in need of protection and preferences.

A prominent company of evangelical leaders—including Dobson, Falwell, Graham, Jeffress, Metaxas, Perkins, and Ralph Reed—has embraced this self-conception. Their justification is often bluntly utilitarian: All of Trump’s flaws are worth his conservative judicial appointments and more-favorable treatment of Christians by the government. But they have gone much further than grudging, prudential calculation. They have basked in access to power and provided character references in the midst of scandal. Graham castigated the critics of Trump’s response to the violence during a white-supremacist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia (“Shame on the politicians who are trying to push blame on @POTUS”). Dobson has pronounced Trump a “baby Christian”—a political use of grace that borders on blasphemy. “Complaining about the temperament of the @POTUS or saying his behavior is not presidential is no longer relevant,” Falwell tweeted. “[Donald Trump] has single-handedly changed the definition of what behavior is ‘presidential’ from phony, failed & rehearsed to authentic, successful & down to earth.”

It is remarkable to hear religious leaders defend profanity, ridicule, and cruelty

as hallmarks of authenticity and dismiss decency as a dead language. Whatever Trump’s policy legacy ends up being, his presidency has been a disaster in the realm of norms. It has coarsened our culture, given permission for bullying, complicated the moral formation of children, undermined standards of public integrity, and encouraged cynicism about the political enterprise. Falwell, Graham, and others are providing religious cover for moral squalor—winking at trashy behavior and encouraging the unraveling of social restraints. Instead of defending their convictions, they are providing preemptive absolution for their political favorites. And this, even by purely political standards, undermines the causes they embrace. Turning a blind eye to the exploitation of women certainly doesn’t help in making pro-life arguments. It materially undermines the movement, which must ultimately change not only the composition of the courts but the views of the public. Having given politics pride of place, these evangelical leaders have ceased to be moral leaders in any meaningful sense.

But setting matters of decency aside, evangelicals are risking their faith’s reputation on matters of race. Trump has, after all, attributed Kenyan citizenship to Obama, stereotyped Mexican migrants as murderers and rapists, claimed unfair treatment in federal court based on a judge’s Mexican heritage, attempted an unconstitutional Muslim ban, equivocated on the Charlottesville protests, claimed (according to The New York Times) that Nigerians would never “go back to their huts” after seeing America, and dismissed Haitian and African immigrants as undesirable compared with Norwegians.

For some of Trump’s political allies, racist language and arguments are part of his appeal. For evangelical leaders, they should be sources of anguish. Given America’s history of slavery and segregation, racial prejudice is a special category of moral wrong. Fighting racism galvanized the religious conscience of 19th-century evangelicals and 20th-century African American civil-rights activists.

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Perpetuating racism indicted many white Christians in the South and elsewhere as hypocrites. Americans who are wrong on this issue do not understand the nature of their country. Christians who are wrong on this issue do not understand the most-basic requirements of their faith.

Here is the uncomfortable reality: I do not believe that most evangelicals are racist. But every strong Trump supporter has decided that racism is not a moral disqualification in the president of the United States. And that is something more than a political compromise. It is a revelation of moral priorities.

If utilitarian calculations are to be applied, they need to be fully applied. For a package of political benefits, these evangelical leaders have associated the Christian faith with racism and nativism. They have associated the Christian faith with misogyny

and the mocking of the disabled. They have associated the Christian faith with lawlessness, corruption, and routine deception. They have associated the Christian faith with moral confusion about the surpassing evils of white supremacy and neo-Nazism. The world is full of tragic choices and compromises. But for this man? For this cause?

Some evangelical leaders, it is worth affirming, are providing alternative models of social engagement. Consider Tim Keller, who is perhaps the most influential

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advocate of a more politically and demographically diverse evangelicalism. Or Russell Moore, the president of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, who demonstrates how moral conservatism

can be both principled and inclusive. Or Gary Haugen, the founder of the International Justice Mission, who is one of the world's leading activists against modern slavery. Or Bishop Claude Alexander of the Park Church in North Carolina, who has been a strong voice for reconciliation and mercy. Or Francis Collins, the director of the National Institutes of Health, who shows the deep compatibility of authentic faith and authentic science. Or the influential Bible teacher Beth Moore, who has warned of the damage done "when we sell our souls to buy our wins." Or the writer Peter Wehner, who has ceased to describe himself as an evangelical even as he exemplifies the very best of the word.

Evangelicalism is hardly a monolithic movement. All of the above leaders would attest that a significant generational shift is occurring: Younger evangelicals are less prone to political divisiveness and bitterness and more concerned with social justice. (In a poll last summer, nearly half of white evangelicals born since 1964 expressed support for gay marriage.) Evangelicals remain essential to political coalitions advocating prison reform and supporting American global-health initiatives, particularly on aids and malaria. They do good work in the world through relief organizations such as World Vision and Samaritan's Purse (an admirable relief organization of which Franklin Graham is the president and CEO). They perform countless acts of love and compassion that make local communities more just and generous.

All of this is arguably a strong foundation for evangelical recovery. But it would be a mistake to regard the problem as limited to a few irresponsible leaders. Those leaders represent a clear majority of the movement, which remains the most loyal element of the Trump coalition. Evangelicals are broadly eager to act as Trump's shield and sword. They are his army of enablers.

It is the strangest story: how so many evangelicals lost their interest in decency, and how a religious tradition called by grace became defined by resentment. This is bad for America, because religion, properly viewed and applied, is essential to the country's public life. The old "one-bloodism" of Christian anthropology — the belief in the

intrinsic and equal value of all human lives—has driven centuries of compassionate service and social reform. Religion can be the carrier of conscience. It can motivate sacrifice for the common good. It can reinforce the nobility of the political enterprise. It can combat dehumanization and elevate the goals and ideals of public life.

Democracy is not merely a set of procedures. It has a moral structure. The values we celebrate or stigmatize eventually influence the character of our people and polity. Democracy does not insist on perfect virtue from its leaders. But there is a set of values that lends authority to power: empathy, honesty, integrity, and self-restraint. And the legitimation of cruelty, prejudice, falsehood, and corruption is the kind of thing, one would think, that religious people were born to oppose, not bless. This disfigurement of evangelical faith squanders the reputation of something valuable: not just the vision of human dignity that captured Blanchard, but also Finney's electric waves of grace. At its best, faith is the overflow of gratitude, the attempt to live as if we are loved, the fragile hope for something better on the other side of pain and death. And this feather of grace weighs more in the balance than any political gain.

It is difficult to see something you so deeply value discredited so comprehensively. Evangelical faith has shaped my life, as it has the lives of millions. Evangelical history has provided me with models of conscience. Evangelical institutions have given me gifts of learning and purpose. Evangelical friends have shared my joys and sorrows. And now the very word is brought into needless disrepute.

This is the result when Christians become one interest group among many, scrambling for benefits at the expense of others rather than seeking the welfare of the whole. Christianity is love of neighbor, or it has lost its way. And this sets an urgent task for evangelicals: to rescue their faith from its worst leaders.