

Poisoned Fruit from a Toxic Tree: Christian Nationalism as the Legacy of Slaveholding Christianity

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As various entries in this volume emphasize, white Christian nationalism has increasingly tightened its grip on the nation's soul. What was once shamefully whispered in dark corners is now proudly shouted from the presidential podium. Many Americans have expressed shock at the existence of this ideology, along with the speed at which it has spread. However, historians of American Christianity understand this as part of a pattern of behavior that dates to the colonies. The colonists contended that they came to America seeking religious freedom. We have interpreted this as the freedom to practice their religion as they wished, but many of them sought the independence to impose their faith on others.

This was evident in the antebellum period, where individuals such as Thornton Stringfellow contended that the Bible established not only the legality but also the divine blessing of taking possession of another individual. He, along with clergy in the North and the South, proclaimed that God had ordained them to own slaves and to have complete control over their lives.¹ The same logic that animated Slaveholding Christianity is now deployed by white Christian nationalists, who believe they have the divine mandate to control the nation. Figures such as Doug Wilson, David Barton, and Charlie Kirk draw on the progenitors of Slaveholding Christianity in their proclamations that the United States is a Christian nation.² Because of this, Christian nationalism should

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The religion of sovereign freedom

Christian nationalism, or more specifically, white Christian nationalism, should be understood as an ideology that fuses religious fundamentalism with political authoritarianism. It combines the nation with faith, making them indistinguishable, which renders the actions of the nation divinely inspired and criticism of the nation heresy.³ Its power comes from a myth that the nation was

Strategy,” *The Guardian* (2025), <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/sep/11/charlie-kirk-quotes-beliefs>.

3. Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry, *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020); Philip S. Gorski and Samuel L. Perry, *The Flag and the Cross: White Christian Nationalism and the Threat to American Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022); Eric L. McDaniel, Irfan Nooruddin, and Allyson F. Shortle, *The Everyday Crusade: Christian Nationalism in American Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), <https://doi.org/DOI>, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/everyday-crusade/34A0EF92928EB4E3AC25B014B6DF0FFC>; Katherine Stewart, *The Power Worshipers: Inside the Dangerous Rise of Religious Nationalism* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019); Angela Denker, *Red State Christians: A Journey into White Christian Nationalism and the Wreckage It Leaves Behind* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 2022); Bradley B. Onishi, *Preparing for War: The Extremist History of White Christian National-*

1. Mark A. Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis*, The Steven and Janice Brose Lectures in the Civil War Era (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978); Iveson L. Brookes, *A Defense of the South Against the Reproaches and Incroachments of the North: In Which Slavery Is Shown to Be an Institution of God Intended to Form the Basis of the Best Social State and the Only Safeguard to the Permanence of a Republican Government*. (Hamburg, SC: Printed at the Republican office, 1850); Benjamin Brantley, *Slavery: A Treatise, Showing That Slavery Is Neither Moral, Political, nor Social Evil* (Printed by B. Brantley, 1844), <https://link-gale-com.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/apps/doc/CY0104123347/SABN?u=txshrcad2598&sid=bookmark-SABN&xid=e2f4ce67&pg=1>.

2. Jack Jenkins, “The Second Coming of Doug Wilson,” *Religion News Service* (2024), <https://religionnews.com/2024/05/31/the-second-coming-of-doug-wilson/>; Tori Otten, “Mike Johnson’s Disturbing Ties to Slavery-Defending Christian Nationalists,” *The New Republic* (2024), <https://newrepublic.com/post/178600/mike-johnson-ties-slavery-defending-christian-nationalists>; Chris Stein, “Charlie Kirk in His Own Words: ‘Prowling Blacks’ and ‘the Great Replacement

at its purest when it was governed by white Christians, specifically white evangelical Protestants. This myth portrays white supremacy as part of the divine plan and makes the racial problems of American Christianity plain as day.⁴

As highlighted above, religious freedom has been a constant refrain in the American song; however, we are often too vague when singing about freedom. As sociologist Orlando Patterson⁵ notes, freedom should be understood as multidimensional. He highlights three specific forms of freedom: personal, civic, and sovereign. Personal freedom is the ability to “do as one pleases within the limits of that other person’s desire to do the same.” Civic freedom, which allows individuals to protect their personal freedom, is “the capacity of adult members of a community to participate in its life and governance”, examples being the right to vote and equal protection under the law.⁶ In contrast to both, sovereign freedom is

[T]he power to act as one pleases, regardless of the wishes of others...The sovereignly free person has the power to restrict the freedoms of others or to empower others with the capacity to do as they please with others beneath them.

The slaveholder seeks sovereign freedom to control the lives of others.⁷ Adherents of Slaveholding Christianity and Christian nationalism extol the virtues of religious freedom; however, their version of religious freedom is neither personal nor civic; it is sovereign.⁸

ism—and What Comes Next (Minneapolis: Broadleaf Books, 2023).

4. Anthea D. Butler, *White Evangelical Racism: The Politics of Morality in America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021); Michael O. Emerson and Glenn E. Bracey II, *The Religion of Whiteness: How Racism Distorts Christian Faith* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2024); Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Joel Edward Goza, *America’s Unholy Ghosts: The Racist Roots of Our Faith and Politics* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2019).

5. Orlando Patterson, *Freedom, Slavery, and the Modern Construction of Rights* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008), 3–4.

6. Personal freedom is analogous to negative freedom, the absence of coercion and restraint in choosing actions. See Isaiah Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty,” in Henry Hardy, ed., *Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), <https://doi.org/10.1093/019924989X.003.0004>. Civic freedom is like positive freedom in that it provides the citizen with the ability or resources to act on their wishes. See Annelien de Dijn, *Freedom: An Unruly History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674245617>; Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty”.

7. Patterson, *Freedom, Slavery, and the Modern Construction of Rights*.

8. Orlando Patterson acknowledges that unchecked personal freedom leads to sovereign freedom. He also acknowledges that too often people gain civic freedom using sovereign freedom. Additionally, Sarah Barringer Gordon demonstrates that the advancement of religious freedom in Virginia, specifically the separation of church and state, was put in place to counteract the growing popularity of antislavery preachers in the state. By creating a separation between church and state, religious objections to slavery were prevented from becoming state policy. See Sarah Barringer Gordon, “The First Wall of

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Like Slaveholding Christianity, the modern Christian nationalist movement seeks to reinterpret and rewrite scripture, history, and current events in such a way that white Protestant men are heroes, while the legitimacy of all others is called into question.⁹ For them, Christianity establishes their humanity and the right to power, rather than a pathway to being a better human. Through constant dehumanization and demonization of others, adherents view barbarity, often framed as governing, as their divine right.¹⁰ Thornton Stringfellow’s “biblical” defense of slavery articulates this.

Here is the authority, from God himself, to hold men and women, and their increase, in slavery, and to transmit them as property forever; here is plenary power to govern them, whatever measure of severity it may require; provided only, that *to govern*, be the object in exercising it.¹¹

The logic presented by Stringfellow was also employed by Christian and Jewish clergy in the North.¹² In their minds, this was the religious freedom that America had promised.

For others, this was a corruption of the faith, as it created barriers and hierarchies that the Gospels sought

Separation Between Church and State: Slavery and Disestablishment in Late-Eighteenth-Century Virginia,” *Journal of Southern History* 85.1 (2019): 61–104, <https://link-gale-com.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/apps/doc/A575902160/CSIC?u=txshracd2598&sid=summon&xid=19f69019>

9. Kristin Kobes Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation*, First edition. (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2020).

10. Onishi, *Preparing for War*; Joshua Davis, “Enforcing Christian Nationalism: Examining the Link Between Group Identity and Punitive Attitudes in the United States,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 57.2 (2018): 300–317, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jssr.12510>, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/jssr.12510>.

11. Thornton Stringfellow, *A Brief Examination of Scripture Testimony on the Institution of Slavery, in an Essay*, Electronic ed. (Richmond: J. W. Randolph, 1856), 9, <https://docsouth.unc.edu/church/stringfellow/stringfellow.html>. Emphasis in original.

12. Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis*.

to eradicate. Frederick Douglass¹³ paints Slaveholding Christianity as an abomination of the faith that sanctifies hypocrisy by having “men-stealers for ministers, women-whippers for missionaries, and cradle-plunderers for church members.”¹⁴ By making slavery their religion, any critique of it was seen as an act of evil. They would often tell slaves, “[I]t is the devil that wants you to be free.”¹⁵ In line with this, slave owners who “found” religion also found an excuse to increase their cruelty. In Douglass’s view, religious slaveholders, especially the clergy, were the “most cruel and cowardly, of all others.” Echoing this sentiment, a submission to *The Liberator*, which recounted the events of the 1849 Charleston Work House Revolt and the extreme cruelty of the conditions, noted the ease with which clergy sent their slaves there as punishment.

[W]ith the reverend gentlemen, they take their slaves into their private coaches early in the morning, have them whipped, and coolly return to their prayers and breakfast, as if doing God service.¹⁶

These cases embody Stringfellow’s logic and demonstrate that the liberation of Christianity did not free them to practice radical humanity, but to engage in their worst inhumanity.

What Douglass and countless others saw in Slaveholding Christianity is what French sociologist Jacques Ellul¹⁷ referred to as the subversion of Christianity. Thinking about Christianity in its totality, Ellul contends that the quest for political, economic, and social power leads Christians to undermine their own teachings.

[T]herefore Christians have known what they were doing. They have freely chosen this course. They have voluntarily forsaken revelation and the Lord. They have opted for new bondage... [They] left the Holy Spirit unemployed, idle, present only on sufferance.

Undergirding this religious zeal for slaveholding, biblical stories had to be recast in a way that made white supremacy a part of the divine plan. Using biblical stories such as the mark of Cain, they contended that the black skin of Africans was the mark God placed on Cain after he murdered his brother Abel.¹⁸ Most fer-

vently they relied on the curse of Ham, where Noah cursed Ham’s son, Canaan, to servitude because of Ham’s transgression. Relying on inaccuracies and misconstrued interpretations, individuals such as the Rev. Iveson L. Brookes¹⁹ concluded that Africans were the descendants of Canaan and were therefore required by God to submit to them.

God himself instituted human slavery, when he authorized Noah to doom the posterity of Ham, through his youngest son Canaan...to perpetual servitude; and the perpetuity of that doom rests, not merely upon the authority of Bible prophecy, but upon the unalterable stamp of inferiority of intellect, which characterizes the descendants of Canaan.

For these preachers and their congregants, opposing slavery was opposing divine law and order.

This argument was not convincing to many who saw divine punishment coming in response to the continuation of slavery.

Are God and Mammon in league? What has the Lord to do with a gang of desperate wretches, who go sneaking about the country like robbers... binding them with chains and hand-cuffs, beat and murder them as they would rattle-snakes? Are they not the Lord’s enemies?... Any person who will save such wretches from destruction, is fighting against the Lord.²⁰

Even in his anger over the lies and cruelty of slavery, Walker wishes to save the nation and its people. He pleads with them to repent or face divine erasure.

[B]ut I tell you Americans! that unless you speedily alter your course, you and your Country are gone!!!!!! For God Almighty will tear up the very face of the earth!!!!... [A]re so firm in the belief that our Creator made us to be an inheritance to them for ever, that their hearts will be hardened, so that their destruction may be sure.²¹

There were others who outright rejected not only Slaveholding Christianity, but any religion presented to them by whites.

The following prayer, reportedly recited by Dutty Boukman to launch the 1791 Haitian Revolution, demonstrates the irreconcilable conflict between the slaveholders’ deity and the God of the enslaved.

This God who made the sun, who brings us light from above, Who raises the sea, and who makes the storm rumble, That God is there, do you understand? Hiding in a cloud, He watches us, he sees all that the whites do! The God of the whites pushes them to crime, but

13. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), <https://doi.org/doi:10.4159/9780674053755>, <https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674053755>.

14. Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 115.

15. Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 82.

16. The Liberator, “The Charleston Work House—The Curtain Raised!” *The Liberator* 19.31 (1849).

17. Jacques Ellul, *The Subversion of Christianity*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2011), 13. <https://books.google.com/books?id=20xMAwAAQBAJ>.

18. This story is powerful for white supremacists because it positions them as the original humans, with all others being flawed derivatives. However, for many slaves, the acts of Cain were no different from those of the slave owners. As one story goes, when God commanded that Cain divulge Abel’s whereabouts, “Den dat Negro turn ‘roun’ an’ he see it wuz de Lord, an’ he got so skeered dat his hair stan’ up right straight an’ his face turn right pale, - an’ sisters an’ brudders, dar am whar de fust white man come frum!” See William Pickens, *American*

Aesop, Negro and Other Humor. (New York: AMS Press, 1969), 23.

19. Brookes, *A Defense of the South Against the Reproaches and Incroachments of the North*.

20. David Walker, *David Walker’s Appeal* (New York: Macmillan, 1995), 29.

21. Walker, *David Walker’s Appeal*, 45.

he wants us to do good deeds. But that God who is so good orders us to vengeance; He will direct our hands, and give us help, Throw away the image of the God of the whites who thirsts for our tears, Listen to the liberty that speaks in all our hearts.²²

Observers of slavery's cruelty saw the anxiety that the slaveholders' divine confidence could not conceal — the awareness, deep in their hearts, that they had made a Faustian bargain.

The 1849 Charleston Work House Rebellion account captures this:

After a night of agony—for be it known, that the city that night was doubly guarded; no slaveholder went to bed without a loaded pistol under his pillow, and his chamber door locked, barred and bolted, for 'conscience makes cowards of them all'.

The most telling of the gnawing anxiety about the defense and protection of slavery comes from Thomas Jefferson, a critic of the religious establishment who owned more than 600 slaves during his lifetime.

And can the liberties of a nation be thought secure when we have removed their only firm basis, a conviction in the minds of the people that these liberties are of the gift of God?... Indeed I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just: that his justice cannot sleep forever... The Almighty has no attribute which can take side with us in such a contest.²³

Three and a half decades after his passing, Jefferson's fears of national devastation came true in the Civil War; however, the religion that justified slavery lived on.

The Gospels of the Lost Cause

The Union's victory in the Civil War and the Civil Rights Amendments were supposed to be the herbicide that killed the tree of Slaveholding Christianity. However, the North's perfunctory effort during Reconstruction and the onset of Jim Crow fed its roots. In response to the defeat, the South refused to question its actions and seek repentance for the evils of slavery. Instead, attempting to maintain their identity, they doubled down on the righteousness of their cause. In this context, Slaveholding Christianity became even more prominent, as they required their faith to give them something — real or false — that would provide them with moral high ground. This religious revival made the Confederate soldier a martyr and the Stars and Bars a sign of piety. To complete this myth, they argued that, like Jesus, they

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were persecuted and crucified and that they would rise again.²⁴

The South's reaction to the formal end of sovereign freedom and the facade of black civic freedom, coupled with the religious fervor of the Lost Cause, created a space where black hope was crushed and white anger unleashed. Racial terrorism was rampant throughout the South, as the Ku Klux Klan and other Christian white supremacist groups emerged as the holy crusaders taking back what was the white man's divine portion. Cloaked in the religious zeal and populism of the Lost Cause, the Klan and other populist organizations took it upon themselves to restore white Protestantism to the South and the nation.²⁵ Working closely with churches and crafting a populist media playbook, which portrayed itself as the defender of white Protestantism, the Klan gained legitimacy, even in the face of its cruelty toward Jews, Catholics, and blacks.²⁶ This image took hold of the American imagination with the release of D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* in 1915, which depicted the Klan as righteous defenders of Southern whites against immoral carpetbaggers and devious black men.

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24. Charles Reagan Wilson, "The Religion of the Lost Cause: Ritual and Organization of the Southern Civil Religion, 1865-1920," *The Journal of Southern History* 46.2 (1980): 219–38.

25. Wilson, "The Religion of the Lost Cause"; Kelly J. Baker, *Gospel According to the Klan: The KKK's Appeal to Protestant America, 1915-1930* (Lawrence, KC: University Press of Kansas, 2017), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/utxa/detail.action?docID=5244950>.

26. Baker, *Gospel According to the Klan*; Butler, *White Evangelical Racism*.

27. *New York Times*, "Masked Klansman in Brooklyn Pulpit Defies Police Ban; Clothed in Full Regalia, He Defends 'Invisible Empire' in Crowded Church. Walks Up Aisle Alone Hushed Congregation Witnesses Greeting by Pastor Before Speaking Begins. Three Policemen on Guard Advertisement of Event Draws 1,000—Straton Says 'Lame Duck' Pastors Rule Ku Klux." *The New York Times* (1922), <https://www.nytimes.com/1922/12/11/archives/masked-klansman-in-brook->

22. Laurent Dubois and John Garrigus, *Slave Revolution in the Caribbean, 1789-1804: A Brief History with Documents* (New York: Bedford/Saint Martin's, 2016), 89, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/utxa/detail.action?docID=6437633>.

23. Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 174–175.

social and economic changes, these critiques did not discourage people from joining, as the Klan captured members from all over the white Protestant spectrum and the sympathies of many more, including President Woodrow Wilson.²⁸ Drawing on the enduring belief that blacks were inferior, they could easily borrow from Stringfellow and other promoters of Slaveholding Christianity to argue that barbarity was necessary in carrying out their divine edict to govern. Interfering with their actions was to defy God's law and order plan.²⁹

The North offered little resistance as they became fatigued of the "Negro Problem" and began to backpedal on the promises made to freedpeople.³⁰ Their ability to critique the South was further undermined by their open embrace of white supremacy by calling for American Imperialism. The calls to subordinate the sovereignty of Filipinos and Cubans by politicians and preachers removed the high ground that the northern whites had enjoyed.³¹

Mired in the nadir, blacks openly challenged the Lost Cause myth and the nation's shirking of its responsibilities to the millions of newly freed blacks. As the window of Reconstruction closed, blacks were placed back into the unholy servitude they believed they had escaped. Faced with a legal system that stripped their rights and an unchecked and rabid white population convinced that God gave them dominion over blacks, it was clear that Slaveholding Christianity was not dead. Frederick Douglass made this known during the 1876 Republican National Convention.

But what is your emancipation? What is your enfranchisement? What does it all amount to, if the black man, after having been made free by the letter of your law, is unable to exercise that freedom, and, after having been freed from the slaveholder's lash, he is to be subject to the slaveholder's shotgun?³²

Three decades later, Reverdy C. Ransom called out the nation for claiming to be a Christian nation, while actively undermining or eradicating black personal and civic freedoms. In Ransom's eyes, "there should be no race problem in the Christian State."³³ In his

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address he took aim at not only the President and Congress for their acquiescence toward Jim Crow but also the clergy who knew it violated Christian values.

American Christianity will un-christ itself if it refuses to strive on, until this Race Problem is not only settled, but settled right; and until this is done, however much men may temporize and seek to compromise, and cry "peace! peace!" there will be no peace until this is done.

Ransom would not live to see the "Christian nation" address the sins he highlighted; that reckoning would not come until after the Great Migration and two World Wars had reshaped the country. And when it attempted to address them, it was an experience like Jacob wrestling the angel.

The faith of moderation

Anxious, angry, and disgusted over the end of Jim Crow, segregationists and white supremacists drew on Slaveholding Christianity to defend their sovereign freedom. Coupling this with the fight against communism, they felt they had the winning hand as preachers and politicians provided their biblical interpretations of why segregation was supported by the scriptures. In his disappointment over the *Brown v. Board* decision and the move toward integration, the future leader of the Moral Majority, Jerry Falwell, compelled Americans not to deviate from God's will. In his 1958 sermon, he insisted his position was rooted not in hate but in biblical principle and faulted the Supreme Court for using the law where scripture should have prevailed.³⁴

Two years later Bob Jones Sr. took to the radio waves with a parallel argument in his sermon.³⁵ Both preachers reached for the Curse of Ham; both insisted that the races were equal in God's eyes

[lyn-pulpit-defies-police-ban-clothed-in.html](#); Baker, *Gospel According to the Klan*.

28. Baker, *Gospel According to the Klan*.

29. Butler, *White Evangelical Racism*; Baker, *Gospel According to the Klan*; Wilson, "The Religion of the Lost Cause."

30. Philip A. Klinkner and Rogers M. Smith, *The Unsteady March* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

31. C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Tisa Wenger, *Religious Freedom: The Contested History of an American Ideal* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.5149/northcarolina/9781469634623.001.0001>; Colin D. Moore, *American Imperialism and the State, 1893-1921* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

32. M. A. Clancy and W. Nelson, *Proceedings of the Republican National Convention Held at Cincinnati, Ohio, June 14, 15, and 16, 1876*, "Making of America" (Republican Press Association, 1876), 27, https://books.google.com/books?id=UBpkVnw_AiIC.

33. Reverdy C. Ransom, "The Race Problem in a Christian State, 1906," in Milton C. Sernett, ed., *African American Religious History*:

A Documentary Witness (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 339, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11smnkh.40>, <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/stable/j.ctv11smnkh.40>.

34. Jerry Falwell, "Segregation or Integration, Which?" *Word of Life Newsletter* (Lynchburg, VA: George M. Jones Memorial Library, October 1958), <https://digitaljones.omeka.net/items/show/818>.

35. Bob Jones Sr., "Is Segregation Scriptural?" in *A Time to Laugh* (17 April 1960), <https://www.drslewis.org/camille/2013/03/15/is-segregation-scriptural-by-bob-jones-sr-1960/>.

but had been given separate places on the earth and were meant to stay in them; both warned that miscegenation would ruin the white race; and both blamed Russia, political opportunists, or the devil for the demand to integrate. Both also drew the theological distinction Stringfellow had drawn a century earlier—that whatever equality might exist before God was not meant to be enacted on Earth:

We have three classes in the Bible. We have the Jew (a segregated race), the Gentile (and this includes everybody else), and the Church of God... In the Church of God there are no Jews, no Gentiles, no white folks, no black folks. We are one in Christ... Up in Heaven there will be no boundaries... But we are not one down here, as far as race is concerned and as far as nations are concerned.

These messages became the fuel for a political movement that framed itself as protecting Christianity but was more focused on maintaining the racial hierarchy.

Alabama Governor George Wallace would lead this fight, as he campaigned on stopping the menace of desegregation. In his 1963 Inaugural Address, Wallace invoked the ghosts of the Lost Cause, such as Robert E. Lee and Jefferson Davis, as he called on the South and its children to fight back against the tyranny of godless Ivy League politicians and judges in Washington, D.C. Using his well-practiced populism, he warned that integration was stripping freedom and that we only need to look at what the South has accomplished, especially Alabama, to see how segregation has been so beneficial.

Let us rise to the call of freedom-loving blood that is in us and send our answer to the tyranny that clanks its chains upon the South. In the name of the greatest people that have ever trod this earth, I draw the line in the dust and toss the gauntlet before the feet of tyranny ... and I say ... segregation now ... segregation tomorrow ... segregation forever.³⁶

This speech, along with his actions at the University of Alabama, made Wallace a national hero among those who feared that their sovereign freedom was going to be erased. In the state of Georgia, Lester Maddox used this to launch himself from owning a cafeteria to the governorship. Maddox, a white supremacist, gained national attention because of his defiance of the 1964 Civil Rights Act by refusing to serve black customers. He claimed that the law violated his freedom as an American and was incompatible with his Christian values.³⁷ Using the same playbook as Jones, Falwell,

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and Wallace, Maddox tapped into and justified the white backlash politically and spiritually.

In contrast to these figures who embraced segregation, there were some who believed that integration was viable, but only on their terms. White moderates, such as Billy Graham, called for racial reconciliation but were often too sheepish to act on it. Graham represented the new Evangelical movement that was just as fiery and opposed to communism but was also open to working with blacks. However, they were not open to questioning the theology that led them to this place. They called racism a sin but openly embraced segregationists. Hiding behind the looming threat of communism and nuclear war, they sat with the establishment rather than marching with the marginalized.³⁸

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In either ignorance or apathy toward the black experience, they urged blacks to rely on the courts and other political institutions.

36. George C. Wallace, "The 1963 Inaugural Address of Governor George C. Wallace" (Montgomery, AL, 14 January 1963), <https://digital.archives.alabama.gov/digital/collection/voices/id/2952/>.

37. Christopher W. Schmidt, "Defending the Right to Discriminate: The Libertarian Challenge to the Civil Rights Movement," in Sally Hadden and Patricia Minter, eds. *Signposts: New Directions in Southern Legal History* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2013); Reese Cleghorn, "Meet Lester Maddox Of Georgia: 'Mr. White Backlash,'" *New York Times* (1966): 274.

38. Butler, *White Evangelical Racism*; Michael Luo, "American Christianity's White-Supremacy Problem," *The New Yorker* (2020), <https://www.newyorker.com/books/under-review/american-christianitys-white-supremacy-problem>.

39. Goza, *America's Unholy Ghosts*.

They engaged in victim-blaming by arguing that while the protests were peaceful, they were trying to incite a violent response.⁴⁰ On Good Friday that year, they issued another letter chastising Martin Luther King Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference for their demonstrations in the city. They attempted to invalidate their presence by calling them “outsiders.” In paternalism, they attempted to choose black leadership by highlighting the work of “responsible citizens.”⁴¹ Whether they understood it or not, these “moderate” clergy were adhering to Slaveholding Christianity because they believed that they should govern blacks.

This feeling was evident in King’s response, where he called out the paternalism of their letters and questioned why they felt they had the right to dictate black demands. Instead of providing a quick sentence acknowledging the pain of oppression, he detailed the turmoil and agony not only of having to go through it as an individual but also seeing one’s mother, father, spouse, and children also suffer from the indignation of segregation.

King has striking words for white “moderates” as he sees them as a greater threat to black freedom than the KKK or the White Citizens’ Council. He lambasted them for being more concerned with order than with justice, and their level of comfort in seeing injustice, while feeling uneasy about seeking justice. The tepidness of their support was worse than the open opposition of vehement white supremacists.⁴² One wonders what kind of moral atmosphere these clergy might have helped create, and whether the climate that produced the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing might have looked differently, had they spent more time worrying about justice than order.

King’s words would touch the hearts of many. With the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act, the nation appeared to publicly rebuke Slaveholding Christianity. But the lips that confessed equality did not match the heart that still believed otherwise. The conditions for backsliding were already in place.

The religion of retrenchment

Just as the South found religion after the Civil War, a new religious zeal took over American politics—its biggest victory was the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980. Reagan, known for his strong stance against communism and the civil rights movement, was viewed as the great hope for a nation that had fallen into disarray. Building on the Southern Strategy, Reagan and his fellow conservatives began practicing a “color-blind” conservatism that masked their racial animus behind work ethic and morality.⁴³

40. Nolan B. Harmon et al., “An Appeal for Law and Order and Common Sense,” Letter to the Editor (16 January 1963).

41. C. C. J. Carpenter et al., “A Call for Unity,” Letter to the Editor (12 April 1963).

42. Martin Luther King Jr., “Letter from Birmingham Jail—April 16, 1963,” in Milton C. Sernett, ed., *African American Religious History: A Documentary Witness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999).

43. Tasha S. Philpot, *Race, Republicans, and the Return of the Party of Lincoln* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007);

With the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act, the nation appeared to publicly rebuke Slaveholding Christianity. But the lips that confessed equality did not match the heart that still believed otherwise. The conditions for backsliding were already in place.

Instead of asserting the genetic inferiority of blacks, they argued that blacks violated American norms.⁴⁴ In its reliance on being covert, “color-blind” conservatism reinforced the idea of black deficiency and the need for whites to maintain their sovereign freedom. In doing so, it licensed skepticism toward the demands of blacks for personal and civic freedom.⁴⁵ It was clear from the beginning that Reagan’s campaign had strong racial overtones; after securing the Republican nomination, he launched his general election campaign in Philadelphia, Mississippi, where three civil rights workers were killed by members of the Klan a decade and a half earlier. In his appeal to the crowd gathered at the Neshoba County Fair, he made sure to inform the crowd that he supported states’ rights.⁴⁶ Like Wallace and Maddox, Reagan used white rage to land the presidency.

In his campaign Reagan was accompanied by figures such as Jerry Falwell and his Moral Majority, who came to save the soul of the nation. Falwell had apologized for his earlier comments supporting segregation but had done little by way of repentance. Following the lead of the larger conservative movement, he and

Paul Frymer, *Uneasy Alliances: Race and Party Competition in America*, Princeton Studies in American Politics: Historical, International, and Comparative Perspectives (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); Martin Gilens, *Why Americans Hate Welfare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

44. Donald R. Kinder and Lynn M. Sanders, *Divided by Color* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); David O. Sears and Victoria Savalei, “The Political Color Line in America: Many ‘Peoples of Color’ or Black Exceptionalism?” *Political Psychology* 27.6 (2006): 895–924, <https://doi.org/10.2307/20447007>, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20447007>.

45. Tali Mendelberg, *The Race Card* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Hanes Walton Jr., Robert C. Smith, and Sherri L. Wallace, *American Politics and the African American Quest for Universal Freedom*, 8th ed. (New York: Routledge, 2017); Nicholas A. Valentino, Vincent L. Hutchings, and Ismail K. White, “Cues That Matter: How Political Ads Prime Racial Attitudes During Campaigns,” *American Political Science Review* 96.1 (2002): 75–90.

46. Ronald Reagan, “Transcript of Ronald Reagan’s 1980 Neshoba County Fair Speech,” *The Neshoba Democrat* (3 August 1980), <https://web.archive.org/web/20110714165011/http://neshobademocrat.com/main.asp?SectionID=2&SubSectionID=297&ArticleID=15599&TM=60417.67>.

other evangelicals ushered in their “color-blind gospel.” This gospel was a form of assimilation in which race discussions would be quashed to bring blacks into the white evangelical tradition.⁴⁷ However, his involvement in the white Christian academy movement, which was an attempt to avoid desegregation, would not be seen as “color-blind.”⁴⁸ Nor would his opposition to sanctions against South Africa’s Apartheid government and his denunciation of Desmond Tutu, who received the Nobel Peace Prize for his work to end Apartheid.⁴⁹

Other white evangelicals were not as contrite; Bob Jones Sr. passed away in 1968, but his namesake university maintained its segregationist stance, emphasizing the concern about miscegenation. The university historically admitted Asian students if they signed a statement agreeing not to engage in interracial dating. After losing numerous court cases and facing pressure from the IRS, it admitted its first black student in 1971: a married black man who worked for the university and left after one month. This did not discourage others, as the university kept admitting black students—but they had to be married.⁵⁰ In the face of losing their tax exempt status and federal funding, they held on to their ban on interracial dating until 2000, when speaking there became a blemish on George W. Bush’s presidential campaign.⁵¹

Contrary to the popular story, it was these government actions that mobilized the Moral Majority, not abortion. Balmer demonstrates that the catalyst was the decision by the IRS to revoke the tax-exempt status of private all-white Christian academies that refused to admit black students.⁵² When the academies lost their fight against the IRS, Paul Weyrich, co-founder of the Heritage Foundation, saw an opening that would galvanize this movement. They reframed their cause—maintaining racially segregated schools—as a defense of religious freedom. In their telling, enforcing the 1964 Civil Rights Act by stripping their tax-exempt status was a gross infringement of that liberty. They were now at war with the IRS. Abortion was introduced in the late 1970s to bring in other groups. In 1971, the Southern Baptist Convention passed a resolution calling for legislation that allowed abortion in cases where the pregnancy was caused by assault, severe deformities, or serious harm to the mother. When the *Roe v. Wade* decision came down, there were some evangelicals who were disgruntled, while others were silent or supportive.

As highlighted above, they quickly hitched their wagon to

Reagan during the 1980 presidential election, even though he was not an evangelical and did not regularly attend worship. Furthermore, as governor of California, he signed the most liberal abortion bill in the country, supported the ERA, and did not side with anti-gay activists.⁵³ However, Reagan was staunchly opposed to the civil rights movement and the 1964 Civil Rights Act. On the day of Martin Luther King Jr.’s funeral, Reagan blamed King for his death, stating that it “was a great tragedy that began when we began compromising with law and order and people started choosing which laws they’d break.” He further asserted that King’s assassination was carried out by white anarchists.⁵⁴ In a recorded conversation with President Nixon in 1971, he referred to the African delegation as “monkeys” who were “still uncomfortable wearing shoes!”⁵⁵ These feelings were also apparent among his White House staff, who would refer to King as “Martin Lucifer Coon.”⁵⁶ In addition, Reagan made sure to let them know that he was in tune with their needs. Speaking to a crowd of 10,000 evangelicals in Dallas in 1980, he called for the IRS to “halt the unconstitutional regulatory vendetta launched by Mr. Carter’s IRS Commissioner against independent schools.”⁵⁷ Advancing their “color-blind gospel,” Falwell and the Moral Majority stood with Reagan in defending South Africa’s Apartheid government and rolling back federal enforcement of the Civil Rights Act.⁵⁸ This particular alliance would last only a decade, but it served as the gateway through which the GOP became the party of white Christian nationalism.

That old-time religion

As the post-civil rights movement era continued, the Moral Majority would lose its prominence due to political miscalculations and competition from other groups. In addition, they were trapped in one party, which limited their ability to have a wide area of influence.⁵⁹ The scandals of the Clinton administration,

53. Kobes Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne*; Balmer, “The Real Origins of the Religious Right.”

54. Gladwin Hill, “Reagan Not Sure Johnson Has Quit,” *New York Times* (1968): 20, <https://ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/reagan-not-sure-johnson-has-quit/docview/118177128/se-2?accountid=7118>.

55. “Reagan, Nixon, and Race” (Miller Center, August 2019), <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/educational-resources/reagan-nixon-and-race>.

56. Lena Williams, “Racist Jokes in White House Reported in a Book,” *New York Times* (1987): 1, <https://ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/racist-jokes-white-house-reported-book/docview/110728641/se-2?accountid=7118>.

57. Ronald Reagan, “Drafts and Back-up Documents—August 1980, Religious Roundtable, Dallas TX (2 of 3),” Archival Folder, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library & Museum (27 June 1980), <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/public/2024-02/40-656-7386407-437-008-2023.pdf>; Kobes Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne*; Balmer, “The Real Origins of the Religious Right.”

58. Kobes Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne*; Butler, *White Evangelical Racism*; Hanes Walton Jr., *When the Marching Stopped: The Politics of Civil Rights Regulatory Agencies* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1988).

59. Frymer, *Uneasy Alliances*; Geoffrey C. Layman, *The Great*

47. Butler, *White Evangelical Racism*; Darren Dochuk, *From Bible Belt to Sunbelt: Plain-Folk Religion, Grassroots Politics, and the Rise of Evangelical Conservatism* (New York: Norton, 2011).

48. Butler, *White Evangelical Racism*; Randall Balmer, “The Real Origins of the Religious Right,” *Politico* (2014), <https://politi.co/2JsQoNr>.

49. Robert Pear, “Falwell Denounces Tutu as a ‘Phony,’” *New York Times* (1985): 1, <https://ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/falwell-denounces-tutu-as-phony/docview/111259993/se-2?accountid=7118>.

50. Butler, *White Evangelical Racism*.

51. Philpot, *Race, Republicans, and the Return of the Party of Lincoln*.

52. “The Real Origins of the Religious Right.”

the election of George W. Bush, and the events of September 11 offered them some rallying points. But they had difficulty sustaining them due to changes in public sentiment, their own internal issues, and missteps by Republicans. The public became more secular and accepting of the LGBTQ community, while evangelical institutions were racked with various controversies, and the Bush administration's fumbled response to the devastation from Hurricane Katrina. The perceived lack of success in the "War on Terror" created the need to regroup and reorganize.⁶⁰

Amid these losses, white Christian nationalists were able to find a new spark with the election of the nation's first black president. The 2008 election of Barack Obama signaled the idea of a post-racial society—a nation in which all Americans had their civic freedom honored—to the nation and the world. white Christian nationalists responded to Obama's message of hope with disgust, anger, and fear. Although they attempted to frame it as opposition to big government, too much of their rhetoric was about racial grievance.⁶¹ They actively demonized Obama by portraying him as an immediate threat to America, but specifically white America, by making accusations about his faith and place of birth.⁶² Labeling him as a Muslim, a religious group that has been racialized,⁶³ provided the opportunity to contend that their conservatism was "color-blind," while sparking racial anxiety among whites.

The release of Jeremiah Wright's sermon, which criticized the

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nation's history of racism and imperialism and suggested divine punishment, was met with intense criticism and helped sell the need to be fearful of an Obama presidency.⁶⁴ Wright's sermon was structurally indistinguishable from the jeremiads that conservative white Christians have given over the nation's history. It called out bad behavior on the part of the nation and argued that divine punishment was coming. Prominent evangelical figures, such as Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell, James Dobson, and John Hagee, have argued that the September 11 attacks, the destruction from Hurricane Katrina, and the Sandy Hook shooting were God's acts of vengeance and that the nation needed to repent.⁶⁵ Wright's sin was highlighting the horrors of slavery, the destruction of indigenous peoples' societies, and the nation's domestic and international attempts to subvert groups. He called out the poisonous nature of Slaveholding Christianity, something that could not be allowed.

While Obama quickly severed his relationship with Wright, his eventual victory and reelection presented an existential threat to white hegemony by challenging their presumed right to rule. Adding to this, the nation witnessed the repeated deaths of blacks at the hands of law enforcement. In response, a renewed scrutiny of the structural and theological roots of the American racial hierarchy emerged. In social, academic, and political circles, citizens attempted to create a plan to bring Slaveholding Christianity up by its roots.⁶⁶ For white Christian

Divide: Religious and Cultural Conflict in American Party Politics (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).

60. McDaniel, Nooruddin, and Shortle, *The Everyday Crusade*; Kobes Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne*; David Edward Campbell, Geoffrey C. Layman, and John Clifford Green, *Secular Surge: A New Fault Line in American Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

61. Christopher S. Parker and Matt A. Barreto, *Change They Can't Believe In: The Tea Party and Reactionary Politics in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

62. Samuel P. Perry, *Rhetoric of Race and Religion on the Christian Right: Barack Obama and the War on Terror* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019), <https://books.google.com/books?id=naW-DwAAQBAJ>; Tom Pyszczynski et al., "Is Obama the Anti-Christ? Racial Priming, Extreme Criticisms of Barack Obama, and Attitudes Toward the 2008 US Presidential Candidates," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 46.5 (2010): 863–66, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2010.04.010>, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0022103110000958>; Wesley M. Hinze, F. Carson Mencken, and Charles M. Tolbert, "From Obama to Osama: Image of God and Trust in Muslims Among the Highly Religious in the United States," *Sociological Focus* 44.1 (2011): 18–36; Jack White, "The Root: Newt Gingrich Adds To Right-Wing Rumors," National Public Radio, (14 September 2010), <https://www.npr.org/2010/09/14/129851689/the-root-newt-gingrich-adds-to-right-wing-rumors>; Stephanie Kelley-Romano and Kathryn L. Carew, "Make America Hate Again: Donald Trump and the Birther Conspiracy. Interrogating the Place of Hate in the 2016 Presidential Campaign: Chapter Three," *Journal of Hate Studies* 14 (2017): 33–52.

63. Sahar F. Aziz, *The Racial Muslim: When Racism Quashes Religious Freedom* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2022); Nazita Lajevardi, *Outsiders at Home: The Politics of American Islamophobia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108782814>, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/product/9B6C61DDC2158E36229F3E57BF5F8352>.

64. Jeremiah Wright, "Confusing God and Government," BlackPast (13 April 2003), <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/2008-rev-jeremiah-wright-confusing-god-and-government/>; Brian D. McKenzie, "Barack Obama, Jeremiah Wright, and Public Opinion in the 2008 Presidential Primaries," *Political Psychology* 32.6 (2011): 943–61, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9221.2011.00847.x>, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9221.2011.00847.x>.

65. Joe Brown, "Religious Conservatives Claim Katrina Was God's Omen, Punishment for the United States," Media Matters for America (13 September 2005), <https://www.mediamatters.org/hurricanes/religious-conservatives-claim-katrina-was-gods-omen-punishment-united-states>; Justin M. Davis and Nathaniel T. French, "Blaming Victims and Survivors: An Analysis of Post-Katrina Print News Coverage," *Southern Communication Journal* 73.3 (2008): 243–57, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10417940802219736>; McDaniel, Nooruddin, and Shortle, *The Everyday Crusade*.

66. Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration*

nationalists, this was no longer about politics, it was spiritual warfare.⁶⁷ Robert Jeffress, the pastor of First Baptist Church in Dallas, contended that Obama was the forerunner to the coming apocalypse.

While I am not suggesting that President Obama is the Antichrist, the fact that he was able to propose such a sweeping change in God's law and still win reelection by a comfortable margin illustrates how a future world leader will be able to oppose God's laws without any repercussions.⁶⁸

The reaction to these events is our current Christian nationalist movement. Like the South's situation after their defeat in the Civil War, the nation had the opportunity to take a moment to reflect, repent, and rebuild. But it decided to repeat the South's response and advance an alternative history that legitimized white supremacy and protected white innocence.

Unlike the hastily fashioned Lost Cause myth, the Christian nationalist movement had been planning its strike for years. Using the scripts of ethnic nationalists, well established media networks, and quick adoption of social media,⁶⁹ they created a coalition convinced that the expansion of rights and liberties to the undeserving was destroying the nation.⁷⁰ The success of this message allowed them to take the reins of the GOP and made white evangelicalism the theological arm of the party. Drawing on the same logic of "divine order" and dominionism used to justify slavery and Jim Crow, Christian nationalists mined the Bible to find justifications for policies widely characterized as racist, misogynistic, Islamophobic, homophobic, and antidemocratic. Like Stringfellow, Falwell, Jones, and Maddox, they hid behind religious freedom to defend their illiberal policies.⁷¹

in the *Age of Colorblindness*, 10th anniversary ed. (New York: The New Press, 2020); Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (New York: Random House, 2015); Christopher J. Lebron, *The Making of Black Lives Matter: A Brief History of an Idea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017); Butler, *White Evangelical Racism*; Robert P. Jones, *The End of White Christian America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017).

67. David Corn, "Does Santorum Believe Obama Is Part of a Satanic Plot?" *Mother Jones* (22 February 2012), <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2012/02/does-santorum-believe-obama-part-satanic-plot/>; Fresh Air, "The Evangelicals Engaged In Spiritual Warfare," National Public Radio (24 August 2011), <https://www.npr.org/2011/08/24/139781021/the-evangelicals-engaged-in-spiritual-warfare>; Onishi, *Preparing for War*.

68. Sarah Pulliam Bailey, "Pastor: Obama Is Paving the Way for the Antichrist," *Religious News Service* (8 January 2014), <https://religionnews.com/2014/01/08/pastor-obama-paving-way-antichrist/>.

69. Stewart, *The Power Worshipers*; Tim Alberta, *The Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory: American Evangelicals in an Age of Extremism* (New York: Harper, 2023); Kobes Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne*.

70. Gorski and Perry, *The Flag and the Cross*; Whitehead and Perry, *Taking America Back for God*; McDaniel, Nooruddin, and Shortle, *The Everyday Crusade*.

71. E. J. Dionne, *Souled Out: Reclaiming Faith and Politics After the Religious Right* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), <http://www.loc.gov/catdir/toc/ecip084/2007045172.html>; Alberta, *The Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory*; Obery M. Hendricks, *Christians*

Using the scripts of ethnic nationalists, well established media networks, and quick adoption of social media, they created a coalition convinced that the expansion of rights and liberties to the undeserving was destroying the nation. The success of this message allowed them to take the reins of the GOP and made white evangelicalism the theological arm of the party.

These efforts brought figures such as Charlie Kirk, Doug Wilson, and David Barton to the mainstream, giving them a larger audience to convert to a version of Christianity that, like its slaveholding ancestor, equates white Christian dominance with divine order. Kirk, before his death, captured the attention of young white Americans through a campaign of misinformation that presented non-white Christians as a threat that must be contained. This culminated in a widely circulated clip with Kirk's assertion that "black people were better off in slavery and subjugation before the 1940s" because the conditions, however bad, produced less crime.⁷² Doug Wilson, co-founder of the Confederation of Reformed Evangelical Churches and a self-described "paleo-Confederate," has provided a full-throated theological defense of antebellum slavery, contending—like Stringfellow and Brookes a century and a half earlier—that the institution of slavery promoted "affection between the races" and lacked racial animus.⁷³ David Barton, who has been rewriting American history for decades through his organization Wall Builders, has argued that the three-fifths compromise—historically understood as a tool by which slaveholding states gained power in Congress and the Electoral College—was actually a tool to end slavery.⁷⁴

These thoughts have become actionable through the local-and-state-level initiative called "Project Blitz," which called for white Christian nationalists to take over school boards, city councils,

Against Christianity: How Right-Wing Evangelicals Are Destroying Our Nation and Our Faith (Boston: Beacon Press, 2021).

72. Stein, "Charlie Kirk in His Own Words."

73. Amy B. Wang, "Hegseth Invited Christian Nationalist Doug Wilson to Preach at Pentagon," *The Washington Post* (2026), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2026/02/18/doug-wilson-pentagon-hegseth-christian-nationalist/>.

74. Mark Potok, "David Barton's Make-Believe Version of American History," Southern Poverty Law Center (24 August 2012), <https://www.splcenter.org/resources/hatewatch/david-bartons-make-believe-version-american-history/>.

state education, and election boards.⁷⁵ The success of this initiative has contributed to increased power in state legislatures and has led to increased partisan gerrymandering and polarization.⁷⁶ In a recent example, the state of Missouri, in an attempt to help the GOP gain more House seats, redrew its districts, with the Missouri Senate President Pro Tem claiming that it was created to make sure the state's representation matches its "Christian conservative majority." In a state where less than two-thirds of residents identify as Christians and fewer identify as Christian conservatives, the map changed the Republican advantage from 6–2 to 7–1. This was accomplished by changing incumbent Emanuel Cleaver's district from a Democrat-leaning district to a Republican-leaning one. Cleaver is a black clergyman who pastors a United Methodist Church.⁷⁷ The gerrymander was Christian nationalism's expression of sovereign freedom by diluting the vote of a community that elected a black Christian pastor as their representative. This is the exact move Slaveholding Christianity perpetrated: claiming Christianity to protect whiteness, while denying personal and civic freedom for black believers.

All the groundwork they had been laying came to fruition with the 2016 election of Donald Trump. Echoing Reagan's 1980 defense of states' rights in Philadelphia, Mississippi, Trump opened his campaign by warning the nation about the immigrants coming from Mexico, whom he referred to as "criminals" and "rapists." Like Reagan, Trump was not an evangelical, but his ability to tap into the racial angst of white America led evangelicals to embrace him as one of their own.⁷⁸ He collected a throng of evangelical leaders—Robert Jeffress, Paula White-Cain, Franklin Graham, Jerry Falwell Jr., James Dobson, and Tony Perkins among them, becoming the messiah for white Christian nationalists.

75. Stewart, *The Power Worshipers*; Kevin J. Burke and Heidi Hadley, "Policy Brief," National Education Policy Center (4 November 2025), <https://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/christian-nationalism>.

76. Brian Kaylor, *The Bible According to Christian Nationalists: Exploiting Scripture for Political Power* (Ashland, OH: Chalice Press, 2025); Kimberly H. Conger, "Tilled Fields for Christian Nationalism: Project Blitz and the Evolution of the Christian Right," *Politics and Religion* 19.1 (2026): 21–34, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755048325100217>, https://www.cambridge.org/core/product/identifier/S1755048325100217/type/journal_article.

77. Brian Kaylor, "Missouri Republicans Invoke Christian Values to Gerrymander Out a Methodist Minister," *Missouri Independent* (5 September 2025), <https://missouriindependent.com/2025/09/05/missouri-republicans-invoke-christian-values-to-gerrymander-out-a-methodist-minister/>.

78. Gorski and Perry, *The Flag and the Cross*; Eric D. Knowles and Linda R. Tropp, "The Racial and Economic Context of Trump Support: Evidence for Threat, Identity, and Contact Effects in the 2016 Presidential Election," *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 9.3 (2018): 275–284, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1948550618759326>, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1948550618759326>; Brenda Major, Alison Blodorn, and Gregory Major Blascovich, "The Threat of Increasing Diversity: Why Many White Americans Support Trump in the 2016 Presidential Election," *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations* 21.6 (2018): 931–40, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1368430216677304>, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1368430216677304>.

During the intense period of the pandemic and the presidential election, the nation witnessed firsthand the devastating effects of the way law enforcement and white civilians treated blacks. In this moment of honesty, they chose to go with the myth. White evangelical clergy remained silent on the issue, while their mainline and black counterparts helped their congregations process these travesties.

Although Trump did not fully speak their language,⁷⁹ figures such as Lance Wallnau cast him as God's "chosen" instrument: a modern Cyrus, a flawed pagan king providentially raised up to deliver God's people.⁸⁰ The Cyrus framing did the work of dissolving the contradictions between Trump's life and the supposed moral commitments of evangelicalism. Even with these accusations and the proof of immoral behavior, they would not be swayed. White evangelicals used the media networks established by right-wing conservatives and Christian nationalists to insulate themselves from the reality of who he was and what he was doing.⁸¹ By portraying themselves as the persecuted and downtrodden—a posture that intensified after the 2020 election, when the refusal to accept defeat recast Trump's loss as the South had once recast its own—they took on the Religion of the Lost Cause.

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79. Jessica Taylor, "Citing 'Two Corinthians,' Trump Struggles to Make the Sale to Evangelicals," *National Public Radio* (18 January 2016), <https://www.npr.org/2016/01/18/463528847/citing-two-corinthians-trump-struggles-to-make-the-sale-to-evangelicals>.

80. Aleem Maqbool, "The Christians Who See Trump as Their Saviour," *BBC* (16 November 2024), <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c20g1zvqj4do>; Gabriel Trip, "Protests Aim at One Man Who Moved State to Right," *The New York Times* (2013).

81. Kobes Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne*; Alberta, *The Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory*; Denker, *Red State Christians*.

82. Brenton Kalinowski, Rachel Schneider, and Elaine Howard Ecklund, "How Christian Leaders Navigate Race after George Floyd's Murder: A Study of Unsettled Times," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 63.4 (2024): 791–808, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jssr.12921>.

admonished their black members for expressing pain and confusion over these events.⁸³ While other religious groups attempted some form of reconciliation, white Christian nationalists launched campaigns against these programs and literally had textbooks rewritten to obscure the nation's understanding of its racial history.⁸⁴

For many, this was a treacherous act. Only a few decades earlier, several white evangelical denominations and institutions had offered apologies for their racist past.⁸⁵ Many attempted to create partnerships with black denominations and churches to facilitate racial reconciliation. All that rhetoric was lost when they launched their holy war on "wokeness." In direct opposition to the reconciliation they once sought, they argued concepts related to reconciliation, such as social justice and Critical Race Theory, were antithetical to the faith. John MacArthur and several other prominent evangelical clergy members signed a letter rebuking social justice, portraying it as a secular pollutant in a sacred space.⁸⁶

In response to these calls, these clergy have responded with arguments about "toxic" empathy and denying the authority of The Sermon on the Mount.⁸⁷ They demonstrated their desire to wallow in the anger, anxiety, and disgust of Slaveholding Christianity because it justifies their cruelty. They have been advocates for ICE raids that routinely place legal immigrants and US citizens in harm's way, all in the name of maintaining social

The phenomenon we see today is the product of centuries of work, where it routinely sprouts new poisons that detract the faithful and the nation from their stated goals of freedom and equality. When the nation has been infected with this toxin, there have been those who attempted to introduce an antidote.

order.⁸⁸ Democratic norms are no longer sacred; they are a satanic obstacle that must be overcome with force if necessary. This was on full display during the January 6, 2021, Insurrection.⁸⁹ The "color-blind gospel" of the past has been exposed as a veneer, which was eroded by the toxicity of Slaveholding Christianity.

Balm in Gilead?

This article has demonstrated the linkage between what we currently call Christian nationalism and Slaveholding Christianity. The phenomenon we see today is the product of centuries of work, where it routinely sprouts new poisons that detract the faithful and the nation from their stated goals of freedom and equality. When the nation has been infected with this toxin, there have been those who attempted to introduce an antidote. This article has pointed to individuals, such as Frederick Douglass and Martin Luther King Jr. as the caretakers of the nation's soul, those who have attempted to administer an antitoxin. Black religious tradition has often been viewed as the counter to Slaveholding Christianity because its relationship with the marginalized makes it keenly aware of what dehumanization does to an individual.⁹⁰

While some studies have shown that blacks may adhere to

83. Emerson and Bracey II, *The Religion of Whiteness*.

84. Janelle Bouie, "In Lessons on Slavery, Context Matters," *The New York Times* (2023), <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/29/opinion/florida-schools-history-slavery.html>; Eugene Robinson, "Florida Curriculum on Slavery Is an Obscene Revision of Black History," *The Washington Post* (2023), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/07/24/florida-curriculum-slavery-benefits-desantis-offensive/>; Rebecca Klein, "The Rightwing US Textbooks That Teach Slavery as 'Black Immigration,'" *The Guardian* (2021), <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2021/aug/12/right-wing-textbooks-teach-slavery-black-immigration>.

85. Gary L. Carter, "An Apology for Racism: Southern Baptists Regret Act of Evil," *Washington Post* (1995), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1995/06/21/an-apology-for-racism/25ce442e-8733-47de-85b1-0dd7c7fd62ec/>; Kein Eckstrom, "Methodists Issue Sweeping Apology for Institutional Racism," *Religion News Service* (1 January 2000), <https://religionnews.com/2000/01/01/news-story-methodists-issue-sweeping-apology-for-institutional-racism2/>.

86. Christianity Today, "John MacArthur's 'Statement on Social Justice' Is Aggravating Evangelicals," *Christianity Today* (2018), <https://www.christianitytoday.com/podcasts/quick-to-listen/john-macarthur-statement-social-justice-gospel-thabiti/>; Serene Jones and Fred Davis, "The Bible Talks About Slavery. So Why Are Conservative Christians So Afraid of Critical Race Theory?" *TIME* (2021), <https://time.com/6094044/bible-slavery-critical-race-theory/>; Bekah McNeel, "The Latest Evangelical 'Statement' and a History of Stumbling on Racial Justice," *Sojourners* (2018), <https://sojo.net/articles/opinion/latest-evangelical-statement-and-history-stumbling-racial-justice>.

87. David French, "Christians Against Empathy Aren't Who They Think They Are," *The New York Times* (2026), <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/02/19/opinion/toxic-empathy-christianity-trump.html>; All Things Considered, "Russell Moore on 'An Altar Call' for Evangelical America," National Public Radio (August 2023), <https://www.npr.org/2023/08/05/1192374014/russell-moore-on-altar-call-for-evangelical-america>.

88. Michelle Boorstein, "Christians Divided over How and Whether to Protest ICE Operations," *The Washington Post* (2026), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2026/01/22/ice-protests-christians-immigration/>; PRRI, "How Christian Nationalism Affects Views on Immigration," PRRI (30 March 2026), <https://prri.org/spotlight/how-christian-nationalism-affects-views-on-immigration/>.

89. McDaniel, Nooruddin, and Shortle, *The Everyday Crusade*; Onishi, *Preparing for War*; Samuel L. Perry, Andrew L. Whitehead, and Joshua B. Grubbs, "'I Don't Want Everybody to Vote': Christian Nationalism and Restricting Voter Access in the United States," *Sociological Forum* 37.1 (2022): 4–26, <https://doi.org/10.1111/socf.12776>, <https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=00d4e680-6053-3f71-acc2-f4e90c9aeade>.

90. C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990); Eric L. McDaniel, *Politics in the Pews: The Political Mobilization of Black Churches* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008).

Christian nationalism at substantial rates, it produces different attitudes than with whites. Instead of an uncritical view of the nation that places it on a pedestal, black Christian nationalists are introspective and see the nation for its beauties and blemishes.⁹¹ Their vision of a Christian nation is very distinct from that of whites: the Christian nation of Douglass and King is in sharp contrast with the Christian nation of Stringfellow and Trump. This presents a clash that often leads to black churches becoming the targets of white rage. During “The Nadir,” after the failure of Reconstruction, Protestant white supremacist organizations, such as the Ku Klux Klan, engaged in terrorism, often focusing on black religious institutions and leaders to enforce the divine racial hierarchy.⁹² The response to Obama’s election triggered increased attacks on black religious institutions,⁹³ the most shocking being Dylann Roof’s 2015 massacre of the members of Mother Emanuel AME, in Charleston, SC.⁹⁴

Along with these physical attacks, the church has had to withstand centuries of verbal attacks from those who saw its existence and the spirituality of blacks as repugnant. The independence and prophetic nature of the black church consistently serve as a threat to Slaveholding Christianity; therefore, whites have felt the need to “govern” the black religious experience from slavery to today.⁹⁵ black churches have been the target of continued surveillance and intimidation. In an attempted show of power, Patriot Front, a white supremacist group, timed their march so that they would be crossing in front of a black church just as the worship service was letting out. The fact that the march took place on the last Sunday of Black History Month in 2024 was not lost on anyone.⁹⁶

91. McDaniel, Nooruddin, and Shortle, *The Everyday Crusade*; Samuel L Perry et al., “White or Woke Christian Nationalists? How Race Moderates the Link Between Christian Nationalism and Progressive Identities,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 89.1 (2025): 98–124, <https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfaf009>; Nichole Renée Phillips, *Patriotism Black and White: The Color of American Exceptionalism* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2018).

92. Albert J. Raboteau, *Canaan Land: A Religious History of African Americans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Butler, *White Evangelical Racism*.

93. Wesley Lowery, *American Whitelash: A Changing Nation and the Cost of Progress* (New York: Mariner Books, 2023); Todd E. Robinson, “Up from the Ashes: The Macedonia Church Fire in the Post-Racial Era,” *Souls* 12.4 (2010): 358–75, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10999949.2010.526061>.

94. Nick Corasaniti, Richard Pérez-Peña, and Lizette Alvarez, “Church Massacre Suspect Held as Charleston Grieves,” *The New York Times* (2015), <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/19/us/charleston-church-shooting.html>; Jesse J. Holland, “Why Racists Target Black Churches in America,” *Christian Science Monitor* (20 June 2015), <https://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Society/2015/0620/Why-racists-target-black-churches-in-America>.

95. Raboteau, *Slave Religion*; Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954–63* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989), Contributor biographical information <http://www.loc.gov/catdir/bios/simon051/97130525.html> Publisher description <http://www.loc.gov/catdir/description/simon033/97130525.html> Sample text <http://www.loc.gov/catdir/enhancements/fy0641/97130525-s.html>.

96. Craig Berry, “Racists and Fascists March in Paducah,” *Forward Kentucky* (26 February 2024), <https://www.forwardky.com/racists-and-fascists-march-in-paducah/>.

Along with these physical attacks, the church has had to withstand centuries of verbal attacks from those who saw its existence and the spirituality of blacks as repugnant. The independence and prophetic nature of the black church consistently serve as a threat to Slaveholding Christianity; therefore, whites have felt the need to “govern” the black religious experience from slavery to today.

In January 2026, a white street preacher attempted to disrupt the service at New Birth Missionary Baptist Church in Atlanta whose pastor, Jamal Bryant, supported social justice efforts and was highly critical of the Trump administration.⁹⁷

Following the killing of Charlie Kirk, Howard-John Wesley, the pastor of Alfred Street Baptist Church in Alexandria, VA, faced a flood of criticism after Fox News and Breitbart circulated his comments. Wesley stated that Kirk should not have been killed but argued he was not obligated to honor him because of his unapologetic racism.

There is nowhere in the Bible where we are taught to honor evil and how you die does not redeem how you lived. You don’t become a hero in death when you are a weapon of the enemy in life.⁹⁸

Furthermore, the first Trump administration’s decision to prioritize the surveillance of black extremists over more violent white supremacist groups has led to concerns that it was an attempt to control what was said in black pulpits.⁹⁹

These actions and the lack of empathy on the part of white

[fascists-march-in-paducah/](https://www.bet.com/article/6a3ukd/disturbing-disruption-rekindles-old-fears-about-white-violence-in-black-churches).

97. BET, “Disturbing Disruption Rekindles Old Fears About White Violence in Black Churches,” BET (4 February 2026), <https://www.bet.com/article/6a3ukd/disturbing-disruption-rekindles-old-fears-about-white-violence-in-black-churches>.

98. Marni Rose McFall, “Who Is Howard-John Wesley? Pastor Goes Viral for Anti-Charlie Kirk Sermon,” *Newsweek* (2025), <https://www.newsweek.com/howard-john-wesley-charlie-kirk-sermon-viral-2130614>.

99. Andrew Rosenthal, “The F.B.I.’s Black Phantom Menace,” *The New York Times* (2017), <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/19/opinion/columnists/fbi-blacks-civil-rights.html>; Khaled A. Beydoun and Justin Hansford, “The F.B.I.’s Dangerous Crackdown on ‘Black Identity Extremists,’” *The New York Times* (2017), <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/15/opinion/black-identity-extremism-fbi-trump.html>.

clergy and members contributed to an exodus of blacks from predominantly white congregations. White-led multiracial congregations were on the front lines of the racial reconciliation effort; however, their treatment of race as an individual-level phenomenon diminished the reality of systemic forces and the need for racial justice efforts.¹⁰⁰ This, combined with their support for Trump, led many blacks to split with the white evangelical community and question if they will ever truly be brothers and sisters in Christ.¹⁰¹ Paula White-Cain, who was Trump's spiritual advisor in his first term, had developed a strong following among blacks, even referring to prominent black televangelist T. D. Jakes as her spiritual father. But that relationship was severely frayed when she came out in support for Trump. It was estimated that the church lost 200-300 members and about \$10,000 in donations due to this.¹⁰² In a December 2020 announcement titled "We Out," Charlie Dates, pastor of Progressive Baptist Church in Chicago, announced that his church was following several other black congregations and leaving the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC). Dates noted with so many others the feeling of betrayal as denominational leaders promised racial reconciliation but failed to properly deliver. When the SBC seminary presidents released their statement admonishing Critical Race Theory, it was the last straw. As Dates stated in his letter, "when did the theological architects of American slavery develop the moral character to tell the church how it should discuss and discern racism?"¹⁰³

The black religious tradition has been resilient in the face of these attacks from the outside, but it must still contend with the poison of Slaveholding Christianity within its ranks. In his final autobiography, Douglass bemoans those blacks who have been convinced by Slaveholding Christianity that this is their proper lot in life.

100. Korie L. Edwards, "Much Ado About Nothing? Rethinking the Efficacy of Multiracial Churches for Racial Reconciliation," in Philip Luke Sinitiere and J. Russell Hawkins, eds. *Christians and the Color Line: Race and Religion After Divided by Faith* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 231–254, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199329502.003.0011>; Michelle Oyakawa, "Racial Reconciliation as a Suppressive Frame in Evangelical Multiracial Churches," *Sociology of Religion* 80.4 (2019): 496–517, <https://doi.org/10.1093/socrel/srz003>.

101. Campbell Robertson, "A Quiet Exodus: Why Black Worshipers Are Leaving White Evangelical Churches," *The New York Times* (2018), <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/09/us/blacks-evangelical-churches.html>; Caleb Gayle, "Black, Evangelical and Torn," *The New York Times* (2023), <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/14/magazine/black-evangelicals.html>.

102. Julia Duin, "She Led Trump to Christ: The Rise of the Televangelist Who Advises the White House," *The Washington Post* (2017), https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/magazine/she-led-trump-to-christ-the-rise-of-the-televangelist-who-advises-the-white-house/2017/11/13/1dc3a830-bb1a-11e7-be94-fabb0f1e9ffb_story.html.

103. Charlie Dates, "'We Out': Charlie Dates on Why His Church Is Leaving the SBC over Rejection of Critical Race Theory," *Religion News Service* (18 December 2020), <https://religionnews.com/2020/12/18/we-out-charlie-dates-on-why-his-church-is-leaving-the-sbc-over-rejection-of-critical-race-theory/>.

There is a fear that the rise of the prosperity gospel, which is viewed as the antithesis of the civil rights movement, has opened the doors for white Christian nationalism to enter the black religious space. Several black preachers associated with it, such as Creflo Dollar, have touted their relationships with political elites viewed as hostile to black interests.

I have met, at the south, many good, religious colored people who were under the delusion that God required them to submit to slavery and to wear their chains with meekness and humility. I could entertain no such nonsense as this, and I quite lost my patience when I found a colored man weak enough to believe such stuff.¹⁰⁴

There is a fear that the rise of the prosperity gospel, which is viewed as the antithesis of the civil rights movement,¹⁰⁵ has opened the doors for white Christian nationalism to enter the black religious space. Several black preachers associated with it, such as Creflo Dollar, have touted their relationships with political elites viewed as hostile to black interests.¹⁰⁶ The former pastor of New Birth in Atlanta, Eddie Long, told a group of civil rights veterans that they should "forget racism."¹⁰⁷

In Florida, state representative Kimberly Daniels, a conservative Democrat, sparked controversy when the video of a sermon she gave went public. In the video, she states, "thank God for slavery" and "if it wasn't for slavery, I might be somewhere in Africa worshipping a tree." Daniels would argue that the comments were taken out of context, but they undermined her attempts to change the state's black history standards, which many saw as whitewash-

104. Frederick Douglass, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (Seattle: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2016), 58–59.

105. Melissa V. Harris-Lacewell, "From Liberation to Mutual Fund: Political Consequences of Differing Conceptions of Christ in the African American Church," in J. Matthew Wilson, ed., *From Pews to Polling Places: Faith and Politics in the American Religious Mosaic* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2007); Anthea Butler, "The Black Church: From Prophecy to Prosperity," *Dissent* 61.1 (2014): 38–41.

106. Stephanie Y. Mitchem, *Name It and Claim It? Prosperity Preaching in the Black Church* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2007), [Table of contents only http://www.loc.gov/catdir/toc/ecip0712/2007008546.html](http://www.loc.gov/catdir/toc/ecip0712/2007008546.html).

107. John Blake, "Not All at Seminary Welcome Bishop: Graduation Invite Provokes Protests," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (2006).

ing the horrors of slavery.¹⁰⁸ Today we find that many prominent black preachers who support the MAGA movement come from this religious worldview.¹⁰⁹ In an outlandish display of support for the then presidential candidate, Wayne T. Jackson of Great Faith Ministries International in Detroit, draped a Jewish prayer shawl over Trump.¹¹⁰ These acts, along with the diminishing institutional reach of the black church, raise questions about whether it still has a prophetic voice and whether people will hear it. If this institution can no longer effectively advocate for the personal and civic freedoms of the black community, who will?

108. David Bauerlein, "Florida House Member Says Black History Message Is Wrong," *The Florida Times-Union* (30 July 2024), <https://www.jacksonville.com/story/news/local/2023/07/30/florida-house-member-says-black-history-message-is-wrong/70476422007/>.

109. Anthea Butler, "How the Prosperity Preachers Supporting Trump Are Using Him to Sell Themselves," *The Washington Post* (2016), https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2016/09/09/how-the-prosperity-preachers-supporting-trump-are-using-him-to-sell-themselves/?utm_term=.264ea4333909; Tom Gjelten, "How Positive Thinking, Prosperity Gospel Define Donald Trump's Faith Outlook," *National Public Radio* (3 August 2026), <https://www.npr.org/2016/08/03/488513585/how-positive-thinking-prosperity-gospel-define-donald-trumps-faith-outlook>; Ed Pilkington, "A Black Pastor Is Preaching Support for Trump—But Can He Win over Voters?" *The Guardian* (2 June 2024), <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/ng-interactive/2024/jun/02/pastor-darrell-scott-trump-black-voters>.

110. "Reagan, Nixon, and Race," Miller Center (August 2019), <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/educational-resources/reagan-nixon-and-race>.

Continually, the nation has chosen pruning over uprooting, evolution over revolution. Each time the tree returned more poisonous than before. The current iteration—white Christian nationalism armed with school boards, state legislatures, federal agencies, and a media ecosystem capable of insulating its adherents from any contradiction—represents the most concentrated political power since the antebellum period, when the tree was first planted in American soil.

There is no version of this story in which the tree dies on its own. It will keep bearing fruit until enough Christians, white and black, are willing to do what every prior generation has refused to do: not prune it, but pull it up by the roots.

Conclusion

A common theme in American history is that perceived black advancement triggers white moral panic. This article explains that the panic is not a reaction but a structure—a theological and political logic running back through Moral Majority's "color-blind gospel," the Birmingham clergy's call for order, Falwell's and Jones's biblical defenses of segregation, the Lost Cause religion that consecrated the Confederate dead, and Stringfellow's biblical justification of slavery. The epigraph from Matthew warns that a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. For nearly 400 years, this tree has produced the bad fruit about which Jesus warned us.

Continually, the nation has chosen pruning over uprooting, evolution over revolution. Each time the tree returned more poisonous than before. The current iteration—white Christian nationalism armed with school boards, state legislatures, federal agencies, and a media ecosystem capable of insulating its adherents from any contradiction—represents the most concentrated political power since the antebellum period, when the tree was first planted in American soil. Frederick Douglass condemned Slaveholding Christianity as "corrupt...partial and hypocritical"—a verdict that still describes its progeny after nearly two centuries. There is no version of this story in which the tree dies on its own. It will keep bearing fruit until enough Christians, white and black, are willing to do what every prior generation has refused to do: not prune it, but pull it up by the roots.