



## The racial demons that help explain evangelical support for Trump

By Nancy D. Wadsworth

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White evangelical Protestants continue to approve of President Donald Trump at about twice the rate of the general public, according to [a recent survey by the Public Religion Research Institute](#). Indeed, the figure is at an all-time high, with some 75 percent expressing a positive view as of March.

Debating the question of why white evangelicals hold so fast for Trump has become a pastime for commentators, given that the president's values and behavior would appear to be anathema to conservative Christians.

Among political evangelicals, at one ideological pole stand those who purport to see a seamless connection between their agenda and that of the current chief executive. "I think evangelicals have found their dream president," Jerry Falwell Jr. [gushed last May](#). An oft-heard variation on this view is that Trump may be a sinner, but he's one [chosen by God for a providential mission](#).

But then there are the prominent hand-wringers. Veteran evangelical writers like Michael Gerson, David French, and Stephen Mansfield have been wrestling with the damage this strategic partnership may be doing to a once-great religious tradition.

It is an abandonment of the evangelical path, these writers argue — to varying degrees and with different emphases — for believers who claim to care about the poor, the suffering, and the outcast, not to mention sexual morality and civic virtue, to line up behind a belligerent boor who bullies women, Mexicans, and Muslims and who has a manifestly feeble understanding of religious texts and history. It's not that evangelicals are personally prejudiced, these writers claim; nonetheless, they find it disturbing that such voters would overlook Trump's racism and misogyny for short-term political gains.

But these sympathetic critics fail to grapple with the idea that Trump's racism and misogyny might actually resonate with the evangelical base, which happens to constitute [about 35 percent](#) of the GOP coalition. In fact, racism and intolerance are more woven into the fabric of evangelicalism than these Christian critics care to accept.

I spent the first 15 years of my career as a scholar studying American evangelicals and race, and in my view, the failure to consider motivations rooted in anxieties about race and gender as an explanation of evangelical Trump support represents a striking omission. The history of American evangelicalism is intensely racially charged. The persistent approval for Trump among white evangelicals ought to prompt far more critical self-reflection within the evangelical community than we've seen so far.

Evangelicals' tenacious affection for Donald Trump is not a bug driven by expediency. Instead, it reflects defining *features* of American evangelicalism that become clearer when we examine the historical record. Doing so reveals that when white conservative evangelicals feel threatened by cultural change, the old demons of racism and misogyny, which lurk at the heart of the American evangelical tradition, return with a vengeance. Trump is just another chapter in that story.

### **The contorted explanations for the evangelical support of Trump**

One version of a familiar defense of evangelicals goes like this: Evangelicals held their nose and voted for Trump despite his obvious flaws because they needed the deal he offered. They felt besieged by a swift-moving culture that, under President Obama, insulted their faith and threatened to rob them of their religious liberties, forcing them to do things like [bake cakes for gay couples](#) and create gender-neutral bathrooms in public places.

In a fearful rage, evangelicals rebranded Trump for strategic purposes, seeing him as a champion in a nostalgic fight for a bygone America and as a tool to achieve tactical wins, in particular the appointment of an anti-abortion Supreme Court justice.

In this take, evangelical Trump support is purely transactional, not necessarily an endorsement of his values. Although they “vastly overdid it,” [says Stephen Mansfield](#), the author of *Choosing Donald Trump: God, Anger, Hope, and Why Christian Conservatives Supported Him*, they moved toward Trump “mainly because they felt traumatized in the wake of the Obama years and terrified by the possibility of a Hillary Clinton presidency.” Trump did activate the (white, rural) “Bubba vote,” Mansfield observes, and evangelicals’ tolerance of his racism is “all very questionable.”

But Mansfield draws a distinction he thinks is important: “I would be careful not to accuse white evangelicals of *supporting* Trump’s racism, but it’s very clear that they tolerated it and they voted for him anyway.” In a triumph of wishful thinking over data, he adds: “I don’t think their support was ever very deep, and it seems to be weakening quickly.”

National Review columnist David French [also embraces the narrative](#) that evangelicals were “gang-tackled” by political correctness under Obama and Clinton would have continued that project. In 2016, “given the choice between a morally corrupt enemy [Clinton] and a morally corrupt ally (or at least someone who promised to be their ally), [evangelicals] chose the ally.” (Elsewhere, however, he notes that Clinton has attracted the ire of the religious right for four decades in part because of [her “arrogant, condescending feminism.”](#))

Nonetheless, French warns, evangelicals should avoid embracing the panoply of distasteful values and behaviors that Trump displays, and he thinks they’ve have failed at that since the election: They’ve leaped to join Trump’s “tribe.” “The true tragedy of Evangelical support for Trump is that a group of Americans who have a higher call on their lives — and faith in a far greater power than any president — now behave (with notable exceptions) exactly like simply another American interest group,” he writes.

(Interestingly, French's wife, fellow conservative writer Nancy French, emerged from the election [with a much less ambivalent view](#), convinced that evangelicals' posture of supporting "family values" and respect for women has "all been a façade." The Republican Party, she says, referring to Trump, "now shelters an abuser." The Roy Moore debacle only underscored that, [she later wrote](#).)

### **Defiling the evangelical legacy?**

Michael Gerson lays out a particularly condemnatory, yet nuanced, version of the Christian anti-Trump lament in a lengthy, elegant essay [in the April issue of the Atlantic](#). He frames Trump loyalty as "the last temptation" that could forfeit evangelicalism's future and despoil a long legacy of positive contributions to American culture.

Cheerleading by second-generation Christian right figures like Falwell Jr. and Franklin Graham, Gerson writes, is "not mere gullibility; it is utter corruption." Allowing hatred of their political enemies to "blind" them to Trump's attacks on people of color and women is a tragic mistake, he suggests.

Gerson offers a 150-year summary of evangelicals' positive work in the public sphere to make the case that, despite some missteps along the way, white evangelicals have mostly been on the right side of moral and social issues, historically. But his history is strikingly lopsided, reflecting a characteristic amnesia among evangelicalism's boosters.

First, his narrative largely concentrates on events in the North and Midwest, with a special focus on his alma mater, Wheaton College in Illinois, a hub of Christian abolitionism. He then grazes on examples of evangelical social engagement, from the Social Gospel movement, which began in the 19th century and continued into the 20th (during which evangelicals built institutions to support new immigrants and the poor), through the ascent of scientific modernism and evangelicalism's Great Reversal (a period of political retreat), and finally to the rise of the religious right in the wake of the sexual revolution.

It was only in the late 20th century, Gerson suggests, that evangelicals became reactive and adversarial, and embraced a narrow political agenda focused on resisting the sexual revolution and safeguarding their own rights. A narrowly conservative set of political commitments, Gerson writes, gave them the short-term advantage of becoming kingmakers for the Republican Party rather than prophets for a righteous, more expansive social cause.

### **Evangelical history is inseparable from America's tortured racial history**

In concentrating his story in the North and Midwest (and by neglecting to mention Native Americans and other groups whites framed as racial "others," even in those regions), Gerson effectively ignores Southern evangelical political history — no small oversight when attempting to explain support for a racist presidential candidate. He also ignores the diaspora of Southern evangelicals who became a key political apparatus for the religious right in the West.

This selectivity enables him to elide what historians of race and religion, including [Paul Harvey](#) and [Mark Noll](#), recognize as the “theological racism” tradition in evangelicalism.

First, evangelical racial history, whether we’re talking about its liberal or conservative branches, is also incomplete without recognition of colonists’ encounters with indigenous nations. The idea that the indigenous people Europeans met upon their arrival were uncivilized “heathens” was anchored in a [white Christian worldview](#), one was employed to justify various forms of [missionary conquest](#).

Only a tiny minority of Christians challenged the many brutal anti–American Indian policies that went hand in hand with the settlement of North America. This racialized history of settler conquest — and the use of theology to justify brutal acts — is ignored by Americans generally, but it represents a distinct blind spot in conservative evangelicals’ tales of their legacy.

On the question of chattel slavery, evangelicals do not just appear as the abolitionists Gerson cites approvingly. The institution had millions of champions among conservative Christians who drew on Scripture and [Curse of Ham](#) theology to defend white supremacy and black subordination. Gerson fails to mention that every major evangelical denomination split along regional lines based on divisions over the slavery question. In fact, the vast bulk of Southern white evangelicals [defended slavery](#), clung to the Lost Cause, fought Reconstruction, and designed and defended Jim Crow.

As the Kentucky General Baptist Association put it in 1860:

Among the white race in the Southern States there is no difference of opinion upon this subject: all are united in the opinion in reference to the political, intellectual, and social inequality between the colored people and the white races. And the people of our Commonwealth generally feel that the present condition of the colored race in this country accords both with the Word and the providence of God.

The Southern Baptist Convention was in fact created in defense of slavery, and in 1947, most Southern state conventions of the SBC refused to support a moderately worded [“charter of race relations”](#) that supported desegregation efforts.

The SBC was moved to [apologize](#) for racial sins in 1995, but clearly that doesn’t end the story.

Gerson laments, “After shamefully sitting out (or even opposing) the civil rights movement, white evangelicals became activated on a limited range of issues.” But it distorts the historical record to reduce white evangelicals’ opposition to civil rights to a parenthetical. It is even more misleading to write: “Fighting racism galvanized the religious conscience of 19th-century evangelicals.”

Indeed, most politically conservative white evangelicals actively fought every racial inclusion effort from abolitionism to affirmative action. As perhaps the Christian Coalition’s most savvy strategist, former executive director [Ralph Reed](#), [put it](#) in 1996, evangelicals:

were among the most fiery champions of slavery and later segregation — all the while invoking God’s name and quoting the Bible to justify their misdeeds. Why are white evangelicals accorded so little respect in the public square today? Certainly part of the answer lies in our past.

In fact, it is arguably not the battle to defend Christian schools in the 1970s that launched the modern Christian right — the narrative that evangelicals themselves, including Gerson, embrace — but resistance by Jerry Falwell Sr., Bob Jones, and others to desegregating those schools in the 1960s.

Falwell’s Thomas Road Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Virginia, did not welcome its first black family until 1970. Falwell also [hosted](#) the virulently racist presidential aspirant George Wallace on guest pulpits in the South and Midwest in the early 1960s.

Ignoring the Southern evangelical tradition also means ignoring the way that movement shaped the broader development of conservatism in America.

### **Southern evangelicals then moved West, reshaping that region’s politics too**

Historian [Darren Dochuk](#) traces how, in search of economic opportunity, Southern evangelicals left the South and a network of conservative pastors, churches, and organization, with a distinct Southern flair, spread out across the Midwest and the Sunbelt. One group, called the Baptist Bible Fellowship, provided the bulk of George Wallace’s campaign support from the Midwest.

In California, these transplanted Southerners organized support for Nixon and, in turn, became leaders of the evangelical wing of the Reagan revolution. Among the former Southerners who served the cause were Christian right architects Tim LaHaye (of *Left Behind* series fame), Bill Bright, founder of Campus Crusade for Christ, James Dobson, founder of Focus on the Family, and the strategist Richard Viguerie.

From there, evangelical mobilization supported, endorsed, or tolerated the racial dog-whistle politics of California’s Proposition 13, which cut taxes for public services associated with racial minorities, Reagan’s attacks on “welfare queens,” and George H.W. Bush’s famous Willie Horton ad.

From this more accurate perspective, evangelical support for Alabamans George Wallace and, last year, Roy Moore, are bookends of a consistent narrative. With race brought back into view, Moore and Trump are not anomalies. While the nationalist white racial politics of Wallace and Trump may not be explicitly faith-based, in all its forms, it has certainly had no shortage of champions among the white evangelical faithful.

Gerson attributes evangelicals’ failures on race matters today to their “relative ethnic and racial insularity” — as if that is accidental. But a real possibility is that more than 85 percent of evangelical congregations remain [racially homogeneous](#) (that is, more than 90 are of a single racial group) because whites have refused to address the ongoing racial attachments in their theology and politics.

As the smartest evangelical critics of Trump recognize, younger generations of evangelicals are quickly distancing themselves from the blight of racism, misogyny, and homophobia in their tradition. Non-evangelical millennials [recoil from these attributes](#).

And the liberal wing of Protestantism seems [finally to be rising](#) as a clear alternative, making [concerted efforts](#) to take stands against police violence, the scapegoating of immigrants, transgender rights, and protests against the racist right.

If American conservative evangelicals hope to avoid retreat to another period of insularity and irrelevance, they must face the possibility that Trump's evangelical loyalists aren't just turning a blind eye to his racial and gender politics. On the contrary: Many may well share those politics.

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