



**ONWARD**



**RUSSELL  
MOORE**

**ENGAGING THE CULTURE  
WITHOUT  
LOSING THE GOSPEL**

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*To my son Jonah Yancey Moore.  
Born on Mardi Gras, with a prophet's name,  
May you carry the sign of Jonah, onward, into the future.*  
(Matt. 12:39–41)



*By remaining faithful to its original commission, by serving its people with love, especially the poor, the lonely, and the dispossessed, and by not surrendering its doctrinal steadfastness, sometimes even the very contradiction of culture by which it serves as a sign, surely the Church serves the culture best.*

—Walker Percy



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# INTRODUCTION

He always said he'd been "born just fine the first time." This joke was his way of waving off our coffee-shop debates about the existence of God. We were both college students in Bible Belt America; I a born-again Christian, he a once-born atheist. He wasn't so much antagonistic to religion so much as he found it sort of strange and out of touch with real life, along the lines of discussing the habitat of elves. He didn't believe in God, and found the idea of heaven to be the most boring thing imaginable. At least the Muslims had virgins waiting in Paradise for sex, he said, but who would want to play a harp, at any time, much less for all eternity? And then one day, out of nowhere, he asked me to recommend a church.

"Can you find me a good Southern Baptist church?" he said. "But one that's not too, you know, Southern Baptist-y?" Surprised to find myself here in the turn-lane of someone's Damascus Road, I stammered that I didn't even know that he had become a Christian. I was waiting for his eyes to well up with tears, as he would recount how my rendition of the theistic argument for design had clinched the decision for him, saving him forever from atheism and despair. He rolled his eyes. "I don't believe any of that stuff," he said. "But I want to go into politics, and I'm never going to be elected to anything in this state if I'm not a church member. And I've looked at the numbers; there are more Southern Baptists around here than anything else, so sign me up."

I was stunned into momentary silence as he stopped to check out a girl walking past our table. He then took a swig of coffee and continued, "But

seriously, nothing freaky; if anybody starts screaming about hell or pulling a snake out of a box, I'm out of there."

My atheist friend was unusually honest, but I don't think he was, honestly, all that unusual. Atheism, he realized, isn't just about what one believes or doesn't believe—it is a tribal marker, one that made him something of an exile in the culture of the Christ-haunted South. He was willing to strike a deal with an innocuous form of Christianity in order to get what he wanted out of "real life." Church membership would protect him

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from cultural marginalization, which was, to him, scarier than hell. Finding Jesus was his way of asking America into his heart, as his personal lord and savior. He was one of many, those who recognized that to be good citizens, to be good neighbors, to be at home in America, one needed to be a Christian.

This Christianity didn't require one to carry a cross, just to say a prayer and to agree to certain values and norms.

## The Collapse of the Bible Belt

Those days are changing, and fast. Increasingly, one need not be religiously identified at all, much less a regular churchgoer, to be at home in American culture. Opinion polls demonstrate this, as does the lessening of certain forms of conspicuous public piety on the part of political and cultural and business leaders. Many within the church are panicking as they see the rise of the religiously unaffiliated in America.<sup>1</sup> Some see it as the death knell for Christianity, and for supernatural religion of any sort. As the rest of the country becomes more like the Pacific Northwest, some would suggest that perhaps Thomas Jefferson was right after all: the Unitarians will inherit the earth. Some suggest that the church must "change or die," by jettisoning those parts of the Christian message most offensive to the ambient culture. And others would suggest that the secularizing of America is another threat, like Communism and "secular humanism" of generations past, that we should denounce angrily. Others

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1. See <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape>.

still counsel that we ought to give up on American culture altogether, and retreat into our enclaves to conserve the gospel for another day.

I don't accept the narrative of progressive secularization, that religion itself will inevitably decline as humanity evolves toward more and more consistent forms of rationalism. As a matter of fact, I think the future of the church is incandescently bright. That's not because of promises made at Independence Hall, but a promise made at Caesarea Philippi—"I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matt. 16:18). I believe that promise because I believe the One who spoke those words is alive, and moving history toward his reign. That is not to say that the church's witness in the next generation will be the same. The secularizing forces mentioned before are real—obvious now in New England and in the Pacific Northwest but moving toward parts of the country insulated so far from such trends. One can almost track these forces as one would a tropical depression on a hurricane radar map. The Bible Belt is teetering toward collapse, and I say let it fall.

When most people analyze the changes in the American religious landscape, they tend to do so in terms of the lens of politics and culture wars. Journalists and sociologists tend to see evangelical Christianity in terms of "advance" or "retreat." For them, if Christianity doesn't operate in precisely the same patterns of partisan voter-bloc organizing, then such constitutes a "pullback" from politics. And if Christians emphasize the public nature of the gospel message, the call to work for justice and righteousness, this represents a threat to American ideals of separation of church and state. Many think this way because they view Christianity the same way my college atheist friend did, as a means to something else, something "real." For those who don't have theological convictions, the idea that others might is often incredible; these convictions must be about something else, money or power or fame. And there have always been those Christian leaders who have confirmed such suspicions because they too have acted as though those things were ultimate. At their worst, Christian efforts at cultural and political engagement have been sometimes disastrous for the mission of the church. Such attempts have too often created subcultures of "us" versus "them," that divide people up into categories of "red state" and "blue state" rather than that of church and mission field. At their best, such efforts have reminded us that all of our lives are to be framed by what is permanent and what is ultimate: the kingdom of God.

## A New Era of Cultural Engagement

American culture is shifting, it seems, into a different era, an era in which religion is not necessarily seen as a social good. Christianity in its historic, apostolic form is increasingly seen as socially awkward at best, as subversive at worst. This is especially true when it comes to what, at the moment, is perhaps the most offensive aspect of such Christianity: our sexual ethic. Our understanding of human sexuality, and behind that of human meaning, is at the heart right now of virtually all of the ongoing “culture war” skirmishes, over the sanctity of human life, over the purpose of marriage and family, over religious liberty and freedom of conscience. Many of the political divisions we have come down to this: competing visions of sexuality as they relate to morality and the common good. For a long time, the church in America has assumed that its cultural conservatism was American, that most people at least ideally wanted to live up to our conception of the good life. Those with eyes to see ought to recognize that if those days ever existed, they are no more.

We must retool, then—some tell us—if we’re going to reach the next generation and if we are going to maintain any influence in American society. We will lose the next generation, they say, because of our “obsession” with sexual morality. We need a more flexible ethic, they say, to adapt or else we will die. This argument is hardly new. In the early twentieth century, this was precisely the rhetoric used by the “modernists” within the mainline Protestant denominations. They were concerned, they said, for the future of Christianity. If the church was to have any future, they warned, we must get over our obsession with virginity. By that, they didn’t mean the virginity of single Christians and their neighbors, but the virginity of our Lord’s mother.

The younger generation wanted to be Christian, the progressives told their contemporaries, but they just couldn’t accept outmoded ideas of the miraculous, such as the virgin birth of Christ. What the liberals missed is that such miracles didn’t become hard to believe with the onset of the modern age. They were hard to believe from the very beginning. First-century peoples, and their forebears in ancient Israel, might not have known how the planets orbit, but they knew how children were conceived. That’s why Joseph’s reaction to Mary’s pregnancy was not “Well, it’s beginning to look a lot like Christmas.” He assumed she had cheated on him, and

this assumption was entirely reasonable because he knew how women get pregnant.

The Christian message isn't burdened down by the miraculous. It's inextricably linked to it. A woman conceives. The lame walk. The blind see. A dead man is resurrected, ascends to heaven, and sends the Spirit. The universe's ruler is a Jewish laborer from Nazareth, who is on his way to judge the living and the dead. Those who do away with such things are left with what modernism's dissenting prophet, J. Gresham Machen, rightly identified as a different religion, a religion as disconnected from global Christianity as the New Age religion of Wicca is from the ancient Druidic rites.<sup>2</sup>

The same is true with a Christian ethic. It didn't become difficult with the onset of the Sexual Revolution, or the secularizing of American culture. It always had been difficult. Walking away from our own lordship—or from the tyranny of our desires—has always been a narrow way. The rich young ruler who once encountered Jesus wanted a religion that would promise him his best life now, extended out into all eternity. But Jesus knew that such an existence isn't life at all, just the zombie corpse of the way of the flesh—always hungry but unable to die. Jesus came to do something else; he came to wreck our lives, so that he could join us to his. We cannot build Christian churches on a sub-Christian gospel. People who don't want Christianity don't want almost-Christianity.

Strangely enough, the increasing marginalization of Christianity offers an opportunity for the church to reclaim a gospel vision that has been too often obscured, even within the sectors of the church we think of as "conservative." Make no mistake: the cultural Christianity of Bible Belt civil religion kept some bad things from happening. It's possible that I may exist now due to such social realities. I may have had ancestors who stayed together long enough to form my family, because divorce would have made them outcasts in their Mississippi hamlet. The loss of the Bible Belt may be bad news for America. But it can be good news for the church.

The problem with American Christianity is that we often assumed there were more of "us" than there were of "them." And we were sometimes confused about who we meant when we said "us." The idea of the church as

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2. J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1923).

part of a “moral majority” was not started, or ended, by the political movement of that name. The idea was that most Americans shared common goals with Christianity, if not at the level of metaphysics then at the level of morality. We could get the conversation to the metaphysics if we started with the moral. The narrative was helped along by the fact that it was, at least in some ways, true. Most Americans did identify with Christianity, and with the goods of Christianity such as church-going and moral self-restraint. These were approved of by the culture as means toward molding good citizens, the kind that could withstand the ravages of the frontier or the threats of global Communism. Mainstream American culture did aspire to at least the ideal of many of the things the Christian church talked about: healthy marriages, stable families, strong communities, bound together by prayer.

Now, politically and socially, this is what a group is supposed to do: attach itself to a broad coalition and speak then as part of a majority. The problem was that, from the very beginning, Christian values were always more popular in American culture than the Christian gospel. That’s why one could speak of “God and country” with great reception in almost any era of the nation’s history but would create cultural distance as soon as one mentioned “Christ and him crucified.” God was always welcome in American culture. He was, after all, the Deity whose job it was to bless America. The God who must be approached through the mediation of the blood of Christ, however, was much more difficult to set to patriotic music or to “Amen” in a prayer at the Rotary Club.

Now, however, it is increasingly clear that American culture doesn’t just reject the particularities of orthodox Christianity but also rejects key aspects of “traditional values.” The “wedge issues” that once benefitted social conservatives do so no longer, and instead now benefit moral libertarians—from questions of sexuality to drug laws to public expressions of religion to the definition of the family.

## Where Do We Go from Here?

This leaves American Christianity to ponder the path forward from here. The alternative many will find is some form of a siege mentality. They will retain the illusion of a previously Christian America, and will grow all

the angrier, thinking that we have lost something that rightly belonged to us. Moreover, there will always be those who will set up a kind of protection racket, labeling the intensity of Christian conviction on the basis of the theatrical force of expressed outrage. Others will wish to simply absorb into the larger culture in their secular lives, while carving out counter-cultures in their churches to hold fast to the gospel, not recognizing how quickly the culture often outweighs the counter.

We ought to approach the future without the clenching of our fists or the wringing of our hands. We ought to see the ongoing cultural shake-up in America as a liberation of sorts from a captivity we never even knew we were in. The closeness of American culture with the church caused many sectors of the American church to read the Bible as though the Bible were pointing us to America itself. That's why endless recitations of 2 Chronicles 7:14 focused on revival in the nation as a means to national blessing, without ever seeming to ask who the "my people" of this text actually are, and what it means, in light of the gospel, to be "blessed."

The strangeness of Christianity will force the evaporation of those who identify with the almost-gospel of Jesus as means to American normality, and it can force the church to articulate, explicitly, the otherness of the gospel. This does not lead to disengagement, but to a different form of engagement, one that is more explicitly Christian while at the same time more open to alliances with those who are not. With a clear gospel grounding, politics and culture can be important without being spiritualized into a sort of totem of personal expression.

The shaking of American culture is no sign that God has given up on American Christianity. In fact, it may be a sign that God is rescuing American Christianity from itself. We must remember that even Israel's slavery in Egypt was a sign of God's mercy. The people of God were in a strange land not because God had forgotten them, but because he was sparing them from a famine in Canaan that would have wiped out the line of Abraham, and, with it, the gospel itself. The church has an opportunity now to reclaim our witness, as those who confess that we are "strangers and exiles on earth" (Heb. 11:13). That strangeness starts in what is the most important thing that differentiates us from the rest of the world: the gospel. If our principal means of differentiation is politics or culture, then we have every reason to see those around us as our enemies, and to see ourselves as somehow morally superior. But if what differentiates us is blood poured out

for our sins, then we see ourselves for what we are: hell-deserving sinners in the hands of a merciful God.

A Christianity that is without friction in the culture is a Christianity that dies. Such religion absorbs the ambient culture until it is indistinguishable from it, until, eventually, a culture asks what the point is of the whole thing. A Christianity that is walled off from the culture around it is a Christianity that dies. The gospel we have received is a missionary gospel, one that must connect to those on the outside in order to have life.

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Our call is to an *engaged alienation*, a Christianity that preserves the distinctiveness of our gospel while not retreating from our callings as neighbors, and friends, and citizens.

This means our priority is a theological vision of what it means to be the church in the world, of what it means to be human in the cosmos. We must put priority where Jesus put it, on the kingdom of God. But while we are a Kingdom First people, we are not a

Kingdom Only people. Jesus told us to seek both the kingdom of God “and his righteousness” (Matt. 6:33). We pursue justice and mercy and well-being for those around us, including the social and political arenas. This means that we will be considered “culture warriors.” Maybe so, but let’s be Christ-shaped culture warriors. Let’s be those who contend for culture, but not those who are at war with the culture. We will see ourselves in a much deeper, much more intractable, much more ancient war—not against flesh and blood or even against cultural forces, but against unseen principalities and powers in the heavenly places.

We will recognize the necessity of engagement in social and political action, even as we see the limits of such action, this side of the New Jerusalem. But we will engage—not with the end goal of winning, but with the end goal of reconciliation. This means that morality and social justice, while good, are not enough. We witness to a gospel that seeks not only to reconcile people to one another but to God, by doing away with the obstacle to such communion: our sin and our guilt. That comes not by voter blocs or by policy papers but by a bloody cross and an empty tomb.

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Over the past century or so, the “culture wars” could be categorized as disputes over human dignity (the pro-life movement, for example), family stability (the sexual and marriage and child-rearing debates, for example), and religious liberty. The intuitions of American Christians on these fronts have often been right, I believe, even if too often unanchored from a larger gospel vision and from a larger framework of justice. We should learn from the best impulses of such engagement, and use our articulation of our views at these points as part of an even bigger argument. These should point us back to a vision of kingdom, of culture, and of mission, rooted in the gospel and in the church, even as we work with those who disagree with us in many ways toward an approximation of justice in the public arena. As we do this, we shouldn’t be ashamed of Jesus, and we shouldn’t be afraid to be out of step with America. We are marching onward, toward a different kind of reign.

The church now has the opportunity to bear witness in a culture that often does not even pretend to share our “values.” That is not a tragedy since we were never given a mission to promote “values” in the first place, but to speak instead of sin and of righteousness and judgment, of Christ and his kingdom. We will now have to articulate concepts we previously assumed—concepts such as “marriage” and “family” and “faith” and “religion.” So much the better, since Jesus and the apostles do the same thing, defining these categories in terms of the creation and of the gospel. We should have been doing such all along. Now we will be forced to, simply to be understood at all. Our end goal is not a Christian America, either of the made-up past or the hoped-for future. Our end goal is the kingdom of Christ, made up of every tribe, tongue, nation, and language. We are, in Christ, the heirs of this kingdom. The worst thing that can happen to us is crucifixion under the curse of God, and we’ve already been there, in Christ. The best thing that can happen to us is freedom from death and life at the right hand of God, and that’s already happened to us too, in Christ. That should free us to stand and to speak, not because we’re a majority, moral or otherwise, but because we are an embassy of the future, addressing consciences designed to long for good news.

## Conclusion

I thought about my unbelieving college friend a while back, as I was having another conversation with an atheist, this time a lesbian progressive activist in a major urban cultural center. She wanted to talk to me because evangelical Christianity piqued her interest, as a sociological phenomenon. She was most interested in our sexual ethic, and peppered me with questions about why we thought certain things were sinful. We had a respectful, civil conversation, though she couldn't help but laugh out loud several times when I articulated viewpoints quite commonplace not only in historic Christianity but in Judaism and, for that matter, Islam. She said I was the first person she'd ever actually talked to who believed that sexual expression ought only to take place within marriage, and that I was the only person she'd ever met in real life who thought that marriage could only happen with the union of a man to a woman. She said that if she ever met anyone who had seen someone for more than three or four weeks, without having sex, she would not first assume that this person had some sort of religious conviction, but rather that this person must bear the psychological scars of some sort of traumatic abuse. She followed this up by saying, "So do you see how strange what you're saying sounds to us, to those of us out here in normal America?"

Before I could answer, I was distracted by those two words: "normal America." How things had turned around. Most of the people in the pews of my church back home would consider themselves to be "normal America." They would view this woman—with her sexual openness and her dismissal of monogamy—as part of some freakish cultural elite, out of touch with "traditional values." But I suspect she's right. More and more, she represents the moral majority in this country, committed to "family values" of personal autonomy and sexual freedom. She is normal, now.

She snapped me out of my daydreaming by asking again, "Seriously, do you know how strange this sounds to me?" I smiled and said, "Yes, I do. It sounds strange to me too. But what you should know is, we believe even stranger things than that. We believe a previously dead man is going to show up in the sky, on a horse."

## A BIBLE BELT NO MORE

**W**e sang a lot in my home church about being strangers and exiles, longing for a home somewhere beyond the skies. But I never felt like a stranger or an outsider until I tried to earn my Boy Scout “God and Country” badge.

Our troop was made up, as our community was, mostly of Baptist and Catholic children, and we would gather each week at St. Mary’s to talk about what it meant to be morally straight. To work on earning this badge, though, we were shuttled over to the United Methodist church for sessions on what it meant to do our part for Christian America. Afterward, we had an open question and answer session with the pastor. And that’s when I discovered I was embarrassing the preacher, my troop leader, and maybe even my country.

I wanted to talk theology. My pastor was warm and welcoming, but I rarely had the opportunity to sit and ask whatever I wanted, and what was on my mind was the devil. A classmate of mine at the elementary school had watched some horror film on demonic possession, and he told me all about it, eerie voices, heads that turned all the way around, the whole thing. It shook me up. So I asked, “Can a Christian be possessed by a demon, or are we protected from that by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit?”

The Methodist minister had been ebullient to that point, in the way a county supervisor cutting a ribbon at a storefront might be. But now

he seemed uncomfortable, shifting in his chair and laughing stiltedly. He hemmed and hawed about pre-modern conceptions of mental illness and about the personification of social structures, with lots of throat clearing between every clause. I had no idea what he was talking about, and there was too much at stake to let him off the hook this easily. I didn't want to risk projectile vomiting demonic ooze. My grandmother was Catholic, but could I spare the time it would take to get to her house to round up a crucifix? I asked the question again. This time he was abrupt, and clear: "There's no such thing as demons."

Now, I was really confused. "Oh, but there are," I said. "Look, right here in the Gospel of Mark, it says . . ." The pastor interrupted me to tell me he was quite familiar with Mark, and with Matthew, and with Q, whatever that was. He knew they believed in the devil, but he didn't. In this day and age, the literal existence of angels and demons wasn't tenable. This was the first time I'd ever encountered anyone, in person, who knew what the Bible said but just disagreed with it. And he was the preacher. Moreover, I picked up in the nonverbal cues there that he didn't just find the idea of angels and demons incredible; he found it embarrassing.

The "God and Country" badge wasn't really about conforming us to the gospel, or to the Bible, to any confessional Christian tradition, or even, for that matter, to the "mere Christianity" of the ancient creeds and councils. This project didn't want to immerse us (or even sprinkle us) into the strange world of the Bible, with its fiery spirits and burning bushes and empty tombs. We were here for the right kind of Christianity, the sort that was a means to an end. We were to have enough Christianity to fight the Communists and save the Republic, as long as we didn't take it all too seriously. We weren't there to carry a cross; we were there to earn a badge. We weren't to be about Christ and kingdom, just God and country. This notion of Christian America stood in the backdrop of the culture wars of the last generation.<sup>3</sup> If we are to engage in a new context, we must understand what we, perhaps unwittingly, embraced, and how to navigate beyond it.

Even though Moral Majority was, formally, a cultural-political organization that lasted for a fixed amount of time in the 1970s and 1980s, the

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3. For a discussion of what "Christian America" means to evangelicals, see Christian Smith, *Christian America? What Evangelicals Really Want* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000), 21–60.

idea of a “moral majority” transcended any particular organization because it was more of a mood than a movement, and it both predated and outlasted the organization by the name. The idea was clear. Most Americans agreed on certain traditional values: monogamous marriage, the nuclear family, the right to life, the good of prayer and church attendance, free enterprise, a strong military, and the basic goodness of the American way of life. The argument was that this consensus represented the real America, and that, for evangelical Christians, evangelical Christianity represented the best way to preserve those values and to attain those ideals.

### The Times They Are A-Changin’

We tend to think of culture wars mostly in terms of the ballot box, of red states and blue states, Republicans versus Democrats, conservatives versus liberals. But before the culture war came to the ballot box, it came to the jukebox.

While the roots of the culture war long predated the 1960s, the decade brought fissures to the surface and threatened, at least in the popular imagination, to split generation from generation. The counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s cast itself almost in prophetic terms, denouncing the sins of American culture. On many points, the counterculture was right. Racism was endemic in American society, propped up by systemic injustice in the Jim Crow South and elsewhere. The Vietnam War turned out to be far more morally complicated than the clear “Allies versus Axis” of World War II or “free world versus the Iron Curtain” of the larger Cold War. The “traditional family” structure of post-war America included the sort of misogyny that excused workplace sexual harassment and sanctioned unequal pay and opportunity for women in the marketplace. For the anti-war and hippie movements, the rapid shifts in American culture on several fronts represented more than just moral and social progress, but instead the ushering in of a new era.

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Bob Dylan’s lyrics framed the culture shift as a kind of Noachic flood, sweeping away the old order to make way for a fresh, new one. “If your time to you is worth saving, then you better start swimming, or you’ll sink like a

stone; for the times, they are a'changin'." John Lennon's "Imagine" pictured an entirely new religion, one that transcended the idea of heaven and hell. And, of course, the cloying "Age of Aquarius" was more triumphalist in its eschatology than any revival tent's gospel song. But on the other side of the radio dial were other voices. Merle Haggard's "Okie from Muskogee" was heard as an answer to the counterculture. "We don't smoke marijuana in Muskogee. We don't wear our hair down long and shaggy, like the hippies out in San Francisco do." As one music critic points out, two days after "Okie" hit the top 100 charts, President Richard Nixon delivered a speech, written by Patrick Buchanan, on the "silent majority."<sup>4</sup> The majority didn't protest or yell or wave signs. They were quiet and virtuous. They didn't want free love or psychedelic drugs. They didn't burn their draft cards down at the courthouse. At issue was more than just a culture war. It was a matter of dueling prophecy charts.

Historian Richard Perlstein observes: "What one side saw as liberation, the other side saw as apocalypse: and what the other saw as apocalypse, the other saw as liberation."<sup>5</sup> It's hard to argue with that analysis. The scenes of LSD-intoxicated college students frolicking nude in the mud of the Woodstock Festival in New York would seem akin to Armageddon to the salt-of-the-earth folk in Middle America for whom "the dawning of the Age of Aquarius" would sound like a threat. At the same time, the words "We don't smoke marijuana in Muskogee" must seem like hell, if you're in Woodstock. And yet, as Perlstein notes, they had to occupy a country together.<sup>6</sup> So who was the real America?

## Impulses of the Religious Majority

As a child growing up in the Christian culture of the 1980s, I learned my place in American culture through Rapture movies. These films—based on a pop-dispensationalist reading of prophecy—pictured a time when the church would be suddenly ripped from the earth, sailing through

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4. David Cantwell, *Merle Haggard: The Running Kind* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2013), 157–58.

5. Richard Perlstein, *Nixonland: The Rise of a President and the Fracturing of America* (New York, NY: Scribner, 2008), 377.

6. *Ibid.*, 46–47.

the air to the invisible (to the onlookers) Jesus Christ. These films would always then picture the panic of those who were “left behind” and would depict the societal chaos that would emerge once the “salt and light” of the culture was out of the way. We always assumed, and never really questioned, that our unbelieving friends would panic when they saw our clothes lying on the pavement or when they passed the empty church parking lots on the way to the Sunday breakfast buffet. It wasn’t just the prophecy-chart parade of horrors that would terrify them: Mark of the Beast microchips and nuclear mushroom clouds and pale horses riding through the sky. It was also, frankly, a world without us, a world with no salt, no light, no Christian presence at all. We never really considered that they might be relieved to see us gone. We never really imagined that our morality might be viewed by American culture as itself scary, like the bad side of a prophecy chart.

The story line of a silent majority was, in most ways, true. Richard Nixon was elected twice, the second time carrying forty-nine of fifty states. Ronald Reagan won two landslide victories. This wasn’t simply a Republican phenomenon. Jimmy Carter was a born-again, small-town Sunday school teacher, and while Bill Clinton was hardly known as morally scrupulous, his years of campaigning among Arkansas Baptists and Pentecostals taught him how to speak to a common sense of American values.

The moral majoritarian impulse among American Christians connected with this larger sense of an America under assault by unelected, and unelectable, elites. The school prayer decisions that many conservative evangelicals found objectionable—some even characterized them as “kicking God out of the schools”—were handed down by the Supreme Court. This same Supreme Court, even more shockingly, handed down the decisions codifying abortion as a constitutional right. Most people didn’t want unrestricted abortion, unraveling families, and a religiously naked public square, the Religious Right contended. And at the time, they were mostly correct in that assessment.

The overheated warnings about the Religious Right were often unfair, and ignorant of what the conservatives, themselves, believed. Contrary to the caricature, the moral majoritarian impulse was never about some sort of theocratic imposition of the Bible on the structures of this world. There were a few voices for this sort of “dominion” theology, seeking the eventual

codification of the Law of Moses in the public square, but these voices were marginal and, if not completely isolated from the movement, at least kept carefully out of public view. The last generation's Religious Right activism was, to the contrary, the exact opposite, affirming and reaffirming that they were not a theological movement but a political one. The tent was broad enough to include evangelical Protestants, Roman Catholics, Latter-day Saints, Orthodox Jews, and even socially conservative agnostics and atheists.<sup>7</sup> The rhetoric was focused much less on the kingdom of God or on the gospel of Christ than on "traditional family values" or "our Judeo-Christian heritage."

Even the language of "reclaiming America for Christ" was hardly as ambitious as it sounded, once one investigated what those using the slogan actually wanted. They were "reclaiming" after all, implying that the order they wanted once existed. And in their sermons and speeches and writings, it was quickly evident that the past to which they looked wasn't witch-burning, pre-Revolutionary Salem, or church-establishing colonial Boston. It was about getting back to the "real" America, the time before the sexual revolution. The order they had in mind, at least for America, wasn't the sort of new order envisioned in the Sermon on the Mount or the Revelation of Patmos. It was about getting back to the vaguely Protestant civil religion of "our Judeo-Christian values."

In that, the religious conservatives, and their counterparts on the smaller but vibrant evangelical Left, were often in the best tradition of American civic concern, utilizing the motives and often the tactics of the abolitionist, temperance, suffragist, and civil rights movements. Their problem wasn't with the American people, but with the powerlessness of the American people, who shared the same values with them. We don't smoke marijuana in Muskogee, or in Wheaton, or in Nashville, or South Bend, or Salt Lake City.

But, as Dylan warned us, the times, they have changed. Real strides have been made on abortion, both legislatively and culturally, but abortion remains legal. Opinion polls routinely demonstrate, rather consistently, that younger people are more willing to identify themselves as "pro-life"

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7. Jerry Falwell, "An Agenda for the 1980s," in *Piety and Politics: Evangelicals and Fundamentalists Confront the World*, ed. Richard John Neuhaus and Michael Cromartie (Washington, DC: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1987), 113.

than older cohorts. This is partly due to sonogram and other technologies that make it harder and harder to maintain that the “fetus” is a clump of impersonal tissue. And it’s partly due to the brave, winsome, and often prophetic voices of the pro-life movement, calling the public conscience to see in the womb a child and a vulnerable neighbor. Whenever social conservatives see polls like this, we tend to announce that we’re winning. Yes and no.

Yes, it’s a win just that the concept of “pro-life” is still alive and viable. Feminist leaders around the time of *Roe v. Wade* probably would have predicted that the anti-abortion movement would die out by the end of the decade, just as the prohibition movement did. The movement is still here, and gaining ground. At the same time, we must remember that the large numbers of self-identified pro-life people can, in some instances, be an indicator of just how embedded the abortion rights culture is in American life.

Moreover, the abortion debate is moving rapidly from the clinical to the chemical as abortion-causing drugs become more and more common and accessible. People will not have to schedule appointments to procure abortions but instead fill prescriptions all the more for the same result. Who knows what these technological developments will do to the abortion mentality? Real gains are being made, but we cannot pretend that we do not have a long way to go until the unborn are, as President George W. Bush put it, “protected in law and welcomed in life.”

The same is true with the sexual coarsening of the American cultural ecosystem. Efforts to curb pornography were successful to some degree in the last generation by persuading and pressuring retail outlets not to sell explicit magazines and hotels to stop providing rental of “adult” films. Who could have predicted that such would largely succeed, but mostly because hotels and gas stations don’t have to sell pornography anymore? Pornography is now weaponized by a digital technology that renders porn all the more dangerous by its virtual ubiquity and its illusory anonymity. I remember years ago passing a sidewalk protest, somewhere in Indiana, of an adult video store in their community. The unlikely allies of conservative Christians and activist feminists banded together to take pictures of the license plates of cars there, and post them around town. It’s been a long time since I’ve heard of such concern. Instead, every pastor I know, without exception, is dealing with an epidemic of pornography, not from businesses

in the community, but from parishioners in the pews, splintering apart marriages and families.

For a long time—indeed for a much longer time than it was in fact true—social conservatives employed a moral majoritarian stance in the marriage debate. Every state that voted on the definition of marriage, it was argued, upheld the “traditional” definition of the conjugal union of a man to a woman. The problem wasn’t the people; the problem was the courts imposing this redefinition. In just a few short years, the majorities have shifted with dramatic speed. Same-sex marriage once was laughed at as a scare-tactic by conservatives arguing for ridiculously dystopian consequences for an Equal Rights Amendment. Now, even the most basic religious liberty protections for those who wish not to participate in same-sex unions are pictured by activists and journalists as bigotry akin to Jim Crow-era segregated lunch counters. Turns out, maybe they *do* smoke marijuana in Muskogee.

But the biggest problem is not that we lost the culture war; it’s that we never really had one. Political scientist Alan Wolfe points out that the heated and outraged rhetoric of evangelicals in the political and media spheres is often directly related to the ineffectuality of Christian distinctiveness in our living rooms and pews. Of conservative Christians, Wolfe writes: “Their inability to use their political power to lower the abortion and divorce rates, instill a sense of obedience and respect for authority among teenagers, and urge courts and legislatures to give special recognition to Christianity’s power role in American religious life creates among them a perpetual outrage machine.”<sup>8</sup> While Wolfe might be overstating his case, he is far from wrong. If the Bible Belt had held to a truly “radical” sort of religious vitality, we ought to see regions with higher church attendance strikingly out-of-step with the rest of the country when it comes to marital harmony, divorce rates, sexual mores, domestic violence, and so on. We’re not the culture warriors we think we are, unless we’re fighting for the other side.

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8. Alan Wolfe, “The Culture War That Never Came,” in *Is There a Culture War? A Dialogue on Values and American Public Life* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2006), 56.

## Is Christianity Changing?

It's not just the cultural landscape that has changed. American Christianity is changing too, though not in the ways that some in the wider culture hope and some in the older generation fear. Many recognize that younger generations of evangelical Christians, especially pastors and other leaders, seem different from their culture warrior predecessors. Because of this, many assume that this wing of the church is headed Left, especially on the contentious questions of sexual morality, which are at the root of the most contested issues of abortion, marriage/family, and even, increasingly, religious liberty and church/state relations. The standard trope I hear often from secular journalists is that the historic Christian commitment to sexual morality, in which sexual relations are limited to the marriage of a man to a woman, is a stumbling block to growth. We are losing our young, this narrative holds, and we would reclaim them if only we would soften our views on sex. If we would, the pews would be filled and the baptisteries bubbling as our leftward Christian soldiers return home.

Now, it's true that newer generations of American evangelicals are interested in more than just the culture war issues of the past. Many are actively engaged on issues of orphan care, ecological stewardship, human trafficking, racial justice, prison reform, poverty, as well as abortion, marriage, and so on. This is not repudiation but an outgrowth of very conservative cultural impulses. Those working to alleviate poverty are, first of all, in continuity with every generation of conservative Christians who have done the same thing. Even when they deviate from the talking points of the Republican business class, they are hardly repudiating their moral and gospel roots. They focus on systemic problems but also on marriage stability, family accountability, and personal responsibility. And they are as committed as ever to the sanctity of human life and to marriage as a one-flesh union between a man and a woman.

Indeed, often the "broader" agenda items reinforce the social conservatism of the next generation of conservative Christians. Those working with the urban poor and the rural underclass see firsthand the devastation of family breakdown, no-fault divorce, the drug culture, predatory gambling, and so on. Moreover, the broader vision hardly makes orthodox Christianity any more palatable to the culture. When evangelicals adopt children, the secularist Left accuses them of "stealing" children for

evangelism. And, if they didn't adopt, the same voices would accuse them of caring for "fetuses" without providing homes for "unwanted" children after they're born. Regardless of how broad the concern, and regardless of where this concern sometimes overlaps with that of progressives, the question usually comes around to, "Yes, but what about sex?"

And it's here that many expect to see a culture war capitulation. The problem is that "young evangelical" is a confusing term, especially for a media culture that often defines the concept in terms of marketing rather than theology or ecclesiology. Some of this is due to professional dissidents who make a living marketing mainline Protestant shibboleths in evangelical vernacular. Often this corresponds with a set of metaphorical (and sometimes literal) "Daddy issues," striking back at some real or perceived injury from a church or family of origin. These figures typically receive a flurry of attention, usually from evangelical college audiences, by questioning (usually without outright denying) doctrines, from biblical inerrancy to the doctrine of hell. These evangelicals are usually an Episcopalian's idea of what an evangelical should be, but they rarely achieve long-term influence among the churches themselves. The "red-letter Christian" who speaks as though the Sermon on the Mount is a pretty good Galilean first draft of the 2024 Democratic Party platform isn't likely to be launching a church-planting movement or an adoption agency, soup kitchen, or halfway house for those just released from jail.

A study by one research group suggested—to much press fanfare—that a new "progressive majority" is the face of American religious life.<sup>9</sup> Religious progressives will soon outnumber religious conservatives, and

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this new "moral majority" will be a liberal one, the interpretation went. My first question was, "What is a *progressive* in this story line?" After all, William Jennings Bryan, the anti-Darwinist of Scopes trial infamy, was a progressive. But so was the biblical inerrantist

Calvinist Charles Haddon Spurgeon. When it comes to religion in America at the moment, progress always boils down to sex.

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9. See page 34 on Religious Orientation by Generation: <http://publicreligion.org/site/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/2013-Economic-Values-Report-Final-.pdf>.

## A New Kind of Church

I'm skeptical, and here's why. The Christian religion isn't an ideology, like socialism or libertarianism, tracked by self-identification. The Christian religion is a Body. A lot of people saying to a pollster that they identify as Christians hardly represents a movement. The question is, "Who goes to church?" And, congregationally speaking, Protestant liberalism is deader than Henry VIII. If adapting to the culture were the key to ecclesial success, then where are the Presbyterian Church (USA) church-planting movements, the Unitarian megachurches?

That said, the older generations are mistaken if they assume the next generation will be more of the same, just with even more prayer for "revival" and "Great Awakening" in the land. The typical younger pastor is less partisan than his predecessor, less likely to speak from the pulpit about "mobilizing" voters and "reclaiming Judeo-Christian values" through political action and economic boycotts. This is not because he is evolving leftward. It is because he wants to keep Christianity Christian. As a matter of fact, the center of evangelical Christianity today is, theologically speaking, well to the right of the old Religious Right. It's true that the typical younger pastor of a growing urban or suburban church doesn't look like his cuff-linked or golf-shirted forefather. But that doesn't mean he's a liberal. He might have tattoos, yes, but they aren't of Che Guevara. They're of Hebrew passages from Deuteronomy.

His congregation's statement of faith isn't the generic sloganeering of the last generations' doctrinally oozy consumerist evangelical movements, but is likely a lengthy manifesto with points and subpoints and footnotes rooted in one of the great theological traditions of the historic church. This pastor might preach forty-five minutes to an hour, sometimes calling out backsliding Christians from the pulpit with all the force of hellfire-and-brimstone revivalists of yesteryear. He is pro-life and pro-marriage, although he is likely to speak of issues like homosexuality in theological and pastoral terms rather than in rhetoric warning of "the gay agenda."

Unlike the typical Bible Belt congregation of the twentieth century, the new kind of evangelical church has strict membership requirements, both in terms of what it takes to enter the believing community and what it takes to say there. There aren't likely to be four-year-olds baptized after repeating sinner's prayers in a backyard Bible club, and the unrepentant

often face what their parents never seemed to notice in their red-and-black-lettered Bibles: excommunication. If this is liberalism, let's have more of it.

These churches are often deeply culturally engaged, in terms of music and the arts, with often a more theologically-rich understanding of how to analyze common grace in cultural artifacts than the Christian subcultures of Bible Belt past, which too often replicated contemporary popular culture, at a lower level of quality, affixing Jesus at the end of it all. But they are often unsure of how to think of political engagement. Again, this is not due to liberalism but to theological conservatism. They have seen social gospels of the Left and the Right try to package a transcendent message for decidedly this-worldly, and sometimes downright cynical, purposes of pulling the levers of political power.

### Correct the Right Way

To understand this, one must understand that evangelical Christians, of almost all sorts, are a narrative-driven people. Our evangelism often includes personal stories of how we came to meet Christ. Our worship often includes personal "testimonies," either spoken or sung. To those outside the community, these can seem cloyingly sentimental, and sometimes even manipulative. Even so, those who emphasize the personal nature of knowing Christ often define following Christ in terms of our past, what we're leaving behind. But even without a spoken testimony, one can often read what an evangelical is walking away from based on what he's reacting, or over-reacting, to. Whenever I hear a Christian say that we shouldn't emphasize the imperatives of Scripture (the commands of God), but rather the indicatives (who we are in Christ), I can predict that, almost every time, this is someone who grew up in an oppressive and rigid legalism. By contrast, when I hear an evangelical Christian wanting to build hedges of rules around the possibility of sin, I can usually guess that this someone was converted out of a morally chaotic background. The Christian who was converted out of a dead, lifeless church often dismisses liturgy as "formalism" and contrasts "religion" with "relationship." At the same time, one who was converted despite an emotionally exuberant but theologically vacuous church will often seek out the ancient roots and structure of a more liturgically ordered church.

What's true at the personal level is also true at the movement level. We tend to ping back and forth between extremes—always seeking to avoid the last bad thing. The Religious Left of the last generation was, in many ways, a reaction from some sectors of the “Jesus People” era to the empty consumerism and racism and militarism of the post-World War II religious establishments.<sup>10</sup> The old Religious Right was in many ways a reaction to the awful consequences of a real or perceived pietistic withdrawal of some in the church as the country veered into Sexual Revolution and an abortion culture.<sup>11</sup> As we move into a new era, the church in America will seek to correct the course from some aspects of the past. We should simply make sure that we correct in the right way.

Some will see any reframing of Christian public witness as a “pull-back from politics” or a withdrawal back into the enclaves. But this is not the case, for several reasons. First of all, it will be impossible. It is one thing for Christianity to correct errors in past forays into the public square: triumphalist expectations, for example,<sup>12</sup> or theatrical panic and paranoia rooted in a victim-status siege mentality. It is quite another to, with silence, constrict the liberty of future generations. Total disengagement is itself a privilege of a cultural Christendom that is fast passing away. A church can avoid taking controversial stances on what it means to be human or what it means to be married only so long as the outside culture at least pretends to share the same basic ideals. A church can ignore the culture only until, as the divorce culture did in the past, that culture reshapes the church in a way that obscures the gospel itself. And a church can ignore the state only as long as the state respects the territorial boundaries of Mr. Jefferson’s “wall of separation.” A state that sees some aspects of Christian witness as bigoted and dangerous will not long stay on the other side of that wall.

The primary reason I think evangelicalism will not go wobbly on public engagement is the gospel. In the rising wave of evangelicals, one hears the constant refrain of “gospel focus” and “gospel centrality.” Some might

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10. David R. Swartz, *Moral Minority: The Evangelical Left in an Age of Conservatism* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

11. See, for instance, Francis Schaeffer, *A Christian Manifesto* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005).

12. See Ronald J. Sider, ed., *The Chicago Declaration* (Carol Stream, IL: Creation House, 1974).

dismiss this as just more evangelical faddishness and sloganeering, and perhaps some of it is. But I think it is far more than that.

The focus on the gospel is tied up with the collapse of the Bible Belt. As American culture secularizes, the most basic Christian tenets seem ever more detached from mainstream American culture. There is, for those who came and will come of age in recent years, no social utility in embracing them. Those who identify with Christianity, and who gather with the people of God, have already decided to walk out of step with the culture. These Christians have already embraced strangeness by spending Sunday morning at church rather than at brunch.

This is leading to a sort of mirror image of the Rapture that the traveling evangelists warned us about. Those who were nominally Christian are suddenly vanished from the pews. Those who wanted an almost-gospel will find that they don't need it to thrive in American culture. As a matter of fact, cultural Christianity is herded out by natural selection. That sort of nominal religion, when bearing the burden of the embarrassment of a controversial Bible, is no more equipped to survive in a secularizing America than a declawed cat released in the wild. Who then is left behind? It will be those defined not by a Christian America but by a Christian gospel.

To understand why this leads to greater engagement rather than to lesser engagement, we must understand what the slow-motion collapse of the Bible Belt is about in the first place. This changes not just the number of unbelievers, but the way that believers themselves think and relate to the outside culture. Philosopher James K. A. Smith, analyzing the work of Charles Taylor, gives the example of an evangelical church-planter relocating from the Bible Belt to a "post-Christian" urban center in the Pacific Northwest. The church planter is equipped to evangelize and make disciples by asking people diagnostic questions about what's missing in their lives. A generation or two ago, that might have been what they were trusting in to get to heaven. In more recent years, it would have been what's missing in order to grant meaning and purpose to their lives. The central issue isn't that the church planter isn't adequately trained to answer their questions; it's that they are asking *different questions*. They do not feel "lost" in the world, and they don't feel as though they need meaning or

purpose. The effective evangelist must engage not only at the level of the answers, but also at the level of the questions themselves.<sup>13</sup>

The same will be true when it comes to the social and political witness of Christianity in a new era. Older generations could assume that the culture resonated with the same “values” and “principles.” They could assume that the culture wanted to conserve their “Judeo-Christian heritage.” Increasingly, the culture doesn’t see Christianity as the “real America.” If Christianity is a means to American values, America can get by without it, because America is learning to value other things. This is, perhaps counterintuitively, both good for the church and good for the church’s engagement with the outside world. J. Gresham Machen warned the church in the 1920s not only that bartering away orthodoxy wouldn’t gain the church cultural credibility, but also that the great danger for the church is to see Christianity as a means to some other end.<sup>14</sup> Christianity does indeed build stronger families, he argued, and it does indeed provide an alternative to Marxist ideologies. But if Christianity is embraced as a way to build strong families or assimilate people into American values or fight Communism, it is no longer Christianity but an entirely other religion, one he called “liberalism.” In the last generation of Christian public engagement, there were some genuine prophets and saints, who called the church out of isolation but constantly warned against a political captivity of the church, a captivity that would tap Christianity of its righteous zeal for the sake of power but would, ultimately, drain it of what every culture finds most troublesome: the exclusivity of Christ.

As American culture changes, the scandal of Christianity is increasingly right up front, exactly where it was in the first century. The shaking of American culture will get us back to the question Jesus asked his disciples at Caesarea Philippi: “Who do you say that I am?” As the Bible Belt recedes, those left standing up for Jesus will be those who, like Simon Peter of old, know how to answer that question. Once Christianity is no longer seen as part and parcel of patriotism, the church must offer more than “What would Jesus do?” moralism and the “I vote values” populism to which we’ve grown accustomed. Good.

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13. James K. A. Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), vii.

14. J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1923), 149–56.

A church that assumes the gospel is a church that soon loses the gospel. The church now must articulate, at every phase, the reason for our existence, because it is no longer an obvious part of the cultural ecosystem. That articulation of the gospel will mean engagement because the most pressing issues are not ancillary to the gospel, in the way some other cultural and political issues are. The temptation will be, as always, to overreact to the sins and foibles of the last generation, with a pullback altogether in an attempt to avoid culture wars and social gospels. A recalibration is called for, to be sure. We are a different people facing a different context. But if we see the cosmic contours of the gospel, we must not swing into a kind of libertarian spirituality that reduces the gospel simply to matters of personal salvation and personal morality. First of all, the culture increasingly finds personal salvation and personal morality to be themselves politically problematic. There is no cordoning them off from a culture in which the personal is the political.

More importantly, an attempt at wholesale withdrawal might exempt us from some of the hucksterism and moralism of some figures in our parents' and grandparents' generations, but it will take us back to the opposite errors of some in our great-grandparents' generation, back to divorcing the gospel from the kingdom, the love of God from the love of neighbor. We could shrug off our social witness altogether, as a defense against legalism. But we would be wrong, and we would, ironically, fall into a pharisaism of the other side, building hedges around a temptation to avoid falling into it. More than that, we would be abandoning a post to which we were assigned and from which we have no permission for leave. The test will be if we can engage the culture without losing the gospel.

## Conclusion

If we ever were a moral majority, we are no longer. As the secularizing and sexualizing revolutions whir on, it is no longer possible to pretend that we represent the "real America," a majority of God-loving, hard-working, salt-of-the-earth cultural conservatives like us. Accordingly, we will engage the culture less like the chaplains of some

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idyllic Mayberry and more like the apostles in the book of Acts. We will be speaking not primarily to baptized pagans on someone's church roll, but to those who are hearing something new, maybe for the first time. We will hardly be "normal," but we should never have tried to be. Jesus promised those who overcome a crown of life. But he never said anything about a "God and Country" badge.