

Rhetoric of religion Retoryka religii

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The Religious Rhetoric of Anti-Trump Evangelicals in the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election

Religijna retoryka Ewangelików nieprzychylnych Donaldowi Trumpowi w wyborach prezydenckich w USA w 2016 roku

Abstract

This essay examines three arguments made by anti-Trump evangelical Christians in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. By explicating the arguments from character, policy, and evangelical witness, I show how this group of minority rhetors – a minority both within American evangelicalism and within the American electorate at large – used their minority status to project a prophetic warning against the Trump candidacy and in so doing developed a rhetoric that was politically potent while remaining faithful to evangelical theology and history. Paradoxically, it was by losing the election that these anti-Trump rhetors won the opportunity to articulate clearly and forcefully an evangelical political rhetoric and an implicit policy agenda.

Esej analizuje trzy argumenty formułowane przez Ewangelików, którzy sprzeciwiali się kandydaturze Donalda Trumpa w wyborach prezydenckich w USA w 2016 roku. Poprzez wyjaśnienie argumentów z charakteru, polityki i świadectw ewangelicznych, autor pokazuje, jak ta grupa retorów, będąca w mniejszości zarówno w amerykańskim ewangelizmie, jak i w amerykańskim elektoracie, wykorzystywała swój status mniejszości do formułowania profetycznej przestrogi przeciwko kandydaturze Trumpa. W ten sposób rozwinęli oni retorykę silną politycznie, pozostając wiernymi ewangelickiej teologii i historii. Paradoksalnie, to dzięki przegranej w wyborach retorzy będący w opozycji do Donalda Trumpa wywalczyli okazję do zmanifestowania swojej ewangelicznej retoryki politycznej i planu politycznych działań.

Key words

Evangelicals, rhetors, anti-Trump rhetoric, presidential election
Ewangelicy, retorzy, retoryka atakująca Trumpa, wybory prezydenckie

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Rhetoric as Philosophy of Language. An Aristotelian Perspective

In the Western world there are many sources from which religious rhetoric are drawn. Chief among these is the Bible. Whether quoting the Bible directly, or making scriptural allusions, or exploiting biblical metaphors such as salt and light and leaven, rhetors have mined the rhetorical resources of the Bible for their own purposes. One such purpose has been political. Particularly in the United States, religious rhetoric has been a mainstay of political discourse. The focus of much of my research over the last 40 years has been on the religious dimensions of the rhetoric used by American presidents. I have been particularly interested in how the rhetoric of American evangelicalism has influenced presidential discourse.¹

Although most of my research has focused on the presidents themselves and their speeches, in two earlier works I examined how the evangelicals' own rhetoric entered into the political dialogue, first in the 2004 presidential campaign, and then in the 2008 campaign.² This essay is an extension of that work and focuses on a relatively small but influential group of evangelicals who opposed the 2016 candidacy – and now the presidency – of Donald J. Trump. Such a focus may seem strange since we now know that 81% of all white evangelical voters in America supported the Trump candidacy. White evangelical leaders were among Trump's strongest supporters, with voices such as James Dobson, Jerry Falwell, Jr., and Robert Jeffress leading the way. But there was another group of evangelical leaders – some of them clergy, some church administrators, some journalists, some social activists, and some public intellectuals, who not only opposed the Trump

1. See, for example, Martin J. Medhurst, "Rhetorical Functions of the Bible in American Presidential Discourse, 1977-2013: A Taxonomy", *Journal of Communication and Religion* 37:2 (2014): 1-23; Martin J. Medhurst, "George W. Bush at Goree Island: American Slavery and the Rhetoric of Redemption", *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 96 (2010): 257-77; Martin J. Medhurst, "George W. Bush and the Debate over Same-Sex Marriage", in *The Prospect of Presidential Rhetoric*, ed. James Arnt Aune and Martin J. Medhurst (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2008), 209-37; Martin J. Medhurst, "Religious Rhetoric and the Ethos of Democracy: A Case Study of the 2000 Presidential Campaign", in *The Ethos of Rhetoric*, ed. Michael J. Hyde (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2004), 114-35.

2. Martin J. Medhurst, "Religion, Politics, and the Evangelical Base: *George W. Bush Faith in the White House*" in *The Rhetoric of the New Political Documentary*, ed. Thomas W. Benson and Brian J. Snee (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), 105-30; Martin J. Medhurst, "Evangelicals, Politics, and the 2008 Presidential Campaign", in *Evangelicals and Popular Culture*, vol. III, ed. Robert H. Woods, Jr. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2012), 33-61.

candidacy, but articulated theologically and doctrinally based reasons for their opposition. It is the rhetoric of this group of anti-Trump evangelicals that I want to examine in this essay.

I focus on this group for two reasons. First, the rhetoric, considered as a whole, articulates a specifically evangelical Christian critique of a major party candidate, and not just any candidate but the nominee of the Republican Party, the party to which white evangelicals have been attached for the last 40 years. By doing so, these evangelicals have articulated, for the first time, a wide-ranging Christian perspective that could form the basis of future political actions, especially as the composition and nature of evangelicalism in America continues to evolve. From a purely historical point of view, therefore, this rhetoric is important. Second, in a paradoxical way, the articulation of this perspective was evangelicalism's finest hour. Paradox is, of course, at the heart of biblical rhetoric – the first shall be last; if you want to save your life, you must lose it; life comes from death. In the case of these evangelicals the paradox is that in losing the election they reclaimed their soul – they articulated loudly and clearly a biblically based critique that contained within it the foundational principles from which a fully formed evangelical political stance could be formed – something that had never really been done before at the national level.

Over the course of the last 40 years, most evangelical political rhetoric has been aimed at specific policies or decisions that seemed to conflict with their biblically inspired beliefs. Starting in the early 1960s with the decisions against prayer in public schools and extending to the *Roe v. Wade* decision in 1973 that legalized abortion in America, evangelicals and other Christians perceived a cultural turning against long-established practices that they identified with the Christian roots of the nation. Those cultural losses continued in the 1980s with decisions against crosses on public property, manger scenes on the courthouse lawn, gay rights, and school-based health clinics that dispensed birth control and other devices without parental consent. By the 1990s the “culture war”, as it had come to be called, was in full sway, with more battles over gay rights, Ten Commandment displays, court cases involving religious freedom, and the continuing battle against legalized abortion.

But the 2016 campaign was different. Instead of one or more hot button issues rallying evangelical ire (and it was almost always ire – what they were against rather than what they were for), the main issue was the Republican nominee himself, his policy pronouncements, and what support for him might say about the evangelical movement as a whole. Since first emerging on the public stage in the mid-1970s, political evangelicalism had always posited the need for any candidate, particularly candidates for the presidency, to be people of high moral character

and exemplary personal habits. Even Ronald Reagan, an evangelical favorite, was criticized for being a divorcee and for having signed a liberalization of the abortion law in California. No one escaped evangelical scrutiny, which reached its apex during the presidency of Bill Clinton, amidst charges of sexual infidelity and lying to cover his transgressions. So it came as somewhat of a shock that early in the 2016 primary season well-known evangelical leaders endorsed or at least tolerated the candidacy of Donald Trump. They did so in spite of his well-known character flaws and in the face of 40 years of previous condemnations of the same actions that they were now willing to overlook. But not all evangelicals became Trump supporters.

One of the interesting aspects of the anti-Trump evangelicals was that they came from every wing of the evangelical movement – conservative, moderate, and liberal. And each of these factions articulated basically the same critique of the Trump candidacy, a critique revolving around three dimensions – character, policy, and evangelical witness, or what evangelical participation in the election would say to the rest of the world about who evangelicals were, what they stood for, and what the future of the movement might be. To represent the anti-Trump evangelical rhetors, I have selected a cross-section of voices, from conservative evangelical (Russell Moore, Albert Mohler, Jr., Erick Erickson), to moderate evangelical (Michael Gerson, Peter Wehner, Andy Crouch, and Leith Anderson), to liberal or progressive evangelical (Jim Wallis, Ron Sider, Rachel Held Evans, Tony Campolo, and David Gushee). I have selected these voices both because they were the most outspoken and because they all self-identify as evangelical Christians.³

The Argument from Character

For most of the past 40 years, character has been a top priority for the evangelical

3. Russell Moore is president of the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention; Albert Mohler, Jr. is president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, KY; Erick Erickson is founder of the blog *The Resurgent* and host of the radio program *Atlanta's Evening News with Erik Erickson*; Michael Gerson is a former senior adviser to President George W. Bush and is now an op-ed columnist for the *Washington Post*; Peter Wehner was a White House adviser to President George W. Bush and is now a senior fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center in Washington, D.C.; Andy Crouch was the executive editor of *Christianity Today* until his retirement in January 2017. He continues to serve as the editorial director of The Christian Vision Project at *Christianity Today International*; Leith Anderson is the president of the National Association of Evangelicals; Jim Wallis is a Christian writer and social activist, as well as the founder and editor of *Sojourners* magazine and the Washington, D.C., religious community of the same name; Ron Sider is the founder and former executive director of Evangelicals for Social Action; Rachel Held Evans is an author, blogger, and social activist; Tony Campolo is a retired professor of sociology and the founder of *Red Letter Christians*; David Gushee is Distinguished University Professor of Christian Ethics at Mercer University in Macon, Georgia. In 2015, both Rachel Held Evans and Tony Campolo tried to separate themselves from evangelicalism. Evans announced her departure from the movement and her identification with mainline Episcopalianism in her blog; Campolo claimed the term “evangelical” was damaged goods and announced the founding of *Red Letter Christians*, an identifier he now prefers over evangelical. In point of fact, however, neither Evans nor Campolo changed their basic theological orientation which was, and remains, evangelical.

movement. Issues of personal character – whether the candidate is a faithful husband and father, whether he is free from obvious sins such as drunkenness, sexual infidelity, gambling, and habitual lying – were usually at the heart of evangelical endorsement or non-endorsement. To fail to pass the character test was usually grounds for no support by the evangelical movement. But 2016 was different, and the anti-Trump rhetors did not hesitate to point out those differences. Albert Mohler, writing in the *Washington Post*, asked:

How could “family values voters” support a man who had, among other things, stated openly that no man’s wife was safe with him in the room? A casino titan who posed for the cover of *Playboy* magazine? A man who boasted that he did not repent of his (well-documented) sins and would not?

Mohler identifies one of the central belief structures of evangelicalism – the need for personal repentance and conversion, the need to seek and receive forgiveness of one’s sins – as precisely what Donald Trump rejects. Why would evangelicals even consider supporting such a person? In Mohler’s view, they should not. He continued:

This year, the Republican nominee is, in terms of character, the personification of what evangelicals have preached (and voted) against. Married three times, flaunting Christian sexual mores, building his fortune and his persona on the *Playboy* lifestyle, under any normal circumstances Trump would be the realization of evangelical nightmares, not the carrier of evangelical hopes.⁴

But 2016 was anything but “normal circumstances”, with Trump winning primaries or caucuses in 36 states, almost all of them with substantial support from white evangelicals. Yet the argument about Trump’s character would not go away. Peter Wehner, among others, pointed to Trump’s temperament as a disturbing factor. “Even more disqualifying”, wrote Wehner, “is Mr. Trump’s temperament. He is erratic, inconsistent and unprincipled. He possesses a streak of crudity and cruelty.”⁵ And worse, Trump often boasted of these very character traits. As Jim Wallis noted, “Trump’s pride in his own success literally ‘trumps’ everything else – shutting out reason, respect, experience, maturity, truth, civility, and certainly any sense of human compassion or empathy.”⁶ As Wehner wrote, “Time and again Trump has shown contempt for those he perceives as weak and vulnerable – ‘losers,’ in his vernacular.”⁷ Yet, as Tony Campolo succinctly observed, “While

4. R. Albert Mohler, Jr., “Donald Trump Has Created an Excruciating Moment for Evangelicals”, *Washington Post*, October 9, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2016/10/09/donald-trump-has-created-an-excruciating-moment-for-evangelicals/?utm_term=.64cbebcc.

5. Peter Wehner, “Why I Will Never Vote for Donald Trump”, *New York Times*, January 14, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/14/opinion/campaign-stops/why-i-will-never-vote-for-donald-trump.html?_r=0.

6. Jim Wallis, “Donald Trump: Narcissist in Chief”, *Sojourners*, July 9, 2015, <https://sojo.net/print/216430>.

7. Peter Wehner, “The Theology of Donald Trump”, *New York Times*, July 5, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/05/opinion/campaign-stops/the-theology-of-donald-trump.html>.

Trump proudly parades success, the God revealed in Jesus, according to the Bible, ‘humbled himself’ and made himself of no reputation (See Philippians 2:5-8).”⁸

Repeatedly, these anti-Trump evangelicals link Trump’s character traits to those recommended in the scriptures, and repeatedly they find him wanting. “From a religious perspective”, wrote Wallis, “Trump’s ‘strength’ is a falsehood. Arrogance, lies, greed, the will to power, and the manipulation of religious prejudice and xenophobia are not strengths to us, but are contrary to all of our faith traditions.”⁹ Wehner even went so far as to identify Trump with “a Nietzschean morality rather than a Christian one.” This was a morality

characterized by indifference to objective truth (there are no facts, only interpretations), the repudiation of Christian concern for the poor and the weak, and disdain for the powerless. It celebrates the “Übermensch”, or Superman, who rejects Christian morality in favor of his own.¹⁰

In short, Trump’s moral stances are a Christian heresy – they do not represent historic Christian teachings. Erick Ericson perceived this heresy clearly when he wrote:

Christians looking for a strong man to protect the church instead of the strongest man who conquered earth is a terrible thing to see. Many Christian leaders are engaging in a kind of syncretism, trying to blend patriotism with Christianity. They seemingly argue that if the nation falls, the church falls and for the church to rise the country must rise. But Christ has already risen so the true church is in no danger of falling. The gates of hell shall not prevail.¹¹

Not only does Trump trumpet a heretical view of the church, but he also embraces values directly opposite of those exemplified in the Bible. According to Wallis, “The worship of money, sex, and power are the worst values of the world, which faith has always stood up against with counter-values of simplicity, integrity, and the service for justice.”¹² That the leaders of the old Christian Right had abandoned these biblical standards for a chance at winning seemed clear to many of these anti-Trump evangelicals. As David Gushee noted:

Christian Right people used to be some of our culture’s leading advocates for a restoration of sound character in America. Character counts, they said. We need to fight all those forces that corrode our culture and cheapen human life, they said. We need men of strong, Christ-like character to lead our families, churches, and nation, they said. Oh well.¹³

8. Tony Campolo, “Explaining Evangelical’s Support for Donald Trump”, *Huffington Post*, July 14, 2016, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/tony-campolo/explaining-evangelicals-s_b_10970796.html.

9. Jim Wallis, “America’s Flirtation with Fascism”, *Sojourners*, December 8, 2015, <https://sojo.net/print/217905>.

10. Wehner, “The Theology of Donald Trump”.

11. Erick Erickson, “Erick Erickson: Here’s what I decided after pastors begged me to reconsider my NeverTrump stance”, *Washington Post*, September 23, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2016/09/23/heres-what-i-decided-after-several-pastors-begged-me-to-reconsider-my-nevertrump-stance/>.

12. Jim Wallis, “Now Is a Time for Faith to Flourish”, January 19, 2017, <https://sojo.net/articles/now-time-faith-flourish>.

13. David Gushee, “Why the Christian right still supports Trump”, *Religion News Service*, October 15, 2016, <http://religionnews.com/2016/10/15/christian-right-still-trump/>

The charge of hypocrisy and betrayal of the gospel mandate could not have been clearer. The majority of American evangelicals may have cast their ballots for Trump, but they do not, according to these anti-Trump evangelicals, represent the beliefs, values, and attitudes that evangelicals have historically embraced.

The Argument from Policy

If questions about Mr. Trump's character were not enough to disqualify him from evangelical support, then surely his policy positions would be. As Wallis wrote,

White evangelicals should have to explain, on the basis of their biblical faith, . . . how they can feel comfortable with Trump's proposed policies of rounding up, deporting, and destroying the families of 11 million immigrants; killing the *families* of terrorists; restricting the religious liberty of Muslim citizens; banning Muslim refugees; and appealing to the worst and most dangerous instincts of white Americans.¹⁴

For anti-Trump evangelicals, these were not just poor policy choices, but were, in fact, anti-biblical stances that placed Mr. Trump beyond the pale of Christian ethics. As Campolo noted with regard to those embracing Trump's refugee policies: These "Evangelicals readily ignore our Lord who called upon us to welcome aliens and told us in Matthew 25 that if we fail to make room for the 'stranger' we are rejecting Him."¹⁵ Leith Anderson, president of the National Association of Evangelicals, signed a letter to Trump, which read in part: "The Bible teaches us that each person – including each refugee, regardless of their country of origin, religious background, or any other qualifier – is made in the Image of God, with inherent dignity and potential. Their lives matter to God, and they matter to us."¹⁶

Over and over, these anti-Trump evangelicals cited biblical warrants for their rejection of Trump's policy stances. And they weren't the only religious voices to do so. In October 2016, Pope Francis said: "It's hypocrisy to call yourself a Christian and chase away a refugee or someone seeking help, someone who is hungry or thirsty, toss out someone who is in need of my help. . . . If I say I am Christian, but do these things, I'm a hypocrite."¹⁷ For Rachel Held Evans, the popular Christian blogger, Trump's policies flew in the face of Jesus's own teaching and practice:

14. Jim Wallis, "It's an Embarrassment to Be an Evangelical This Election", *Sojourners*, February 25, 2016, <https://sojo.net/print/218676>.

15. Tony Campolo, "Trumpism and Evangelicals", January 25, 2016, <https://www.redletterchristians.org/trumpism-and-evangelicals>

16. Leith Anderson, "Letter to President Trump on Executive Order on Refugees", January 29, 2017, <https://www.nae.net/letter-president-trump-executive-order-refugees/>

17. Pope Francis quoted in Sarah Pulliam Bailey, "Some of the U.S.'s most important Catholic leaders are condemning Trump's travel ban", *Washington Post*, January 30, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2017/01/30/some-of-the-u-s-s-most-important-catholic-leaders-are-condemning-trumps-travel-ban/?utm_term=.a90f536a5756.

As it turns out, the kind of people Donald Trump and the Religious Right deem acceptable collateral damage in their quest for power – the poor, the oppressed, the marginalized, the hated minorities – are the very people Jesus prioritized. His life and ministry started with them and his kingdom will ultimately be realized through them. The gospel isn't about protecting power and privilege, but rather about surrendering them until God's vision of justice is fulfilled.¹⁸

But it wasn't only immigration and refugee policies that caused an outcry from anti-Trump evangelicals. So did his Muslim policies. Russell Moore, head of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission for the Southern Baptist Convention, wrote:

Make no mistake. A government that can shut down mosques simply because they are mosques can shut down Bible studies because they are Bible studies. A government that can close the borders to all Muslims simply on the basis of their religious belief can do the same thing for evangelical Christians. A government that issues ID badges for Muslims simply because they are Muslims can, in the fullness of time, demand the same for Christians because we are Christians.¹⁹

But the issue that seemed most to concern anti-Trump evangelicals was the perceived racism that lay at the heart of the Trump candidacy – from being the leading “birther” critic of President Obama, to using racially coded language, to calling Mexicans rapists and murderers, to proposing tax policies that would favor the wealthy over the poor, many of whom were minorities, Trump seemed to signal that he was the candidate of white America. Against this rhetoric of white superiority, anti-Trump evangelicals spoke out with a vehemence seldom seen in evangelical circles.

In April, Jim Wallis and a large group of evangelical and mainline Protestant leaders issued a statement under the title “Called to Resist Bigotry – A Statement of Faithful Obedience.” One part stated:

The growing racial and cultural diversity of our churches and society should be welcomed by those who believe in the gospel of Jesus Christ, and embraced by those who call themselves the body of Christ. Instead, Donald Trump is condoning the politics of race and hate, and now even justifying political violence. His divisive rhetoric, laced with racist, bigoted, and hateful attitudes and wrapped in nationalistic xenophobia, is being enthusiastically embraced by millions – including many self-identified Christians, who are allowing their racial identity to trump their faith. This stands against the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ.²⁰

Most of the signers of that statement came from the moderate and progressive wings of evangelicalism. But consider this statement from conservative Russell Moore:

18. Rachel Held Evans, “Donald Trump and a Tale of Two Gospels”, *RachelHeldEvans.com*, January 28, 2016, <https://rachelheldevans.com/blog/donald-trump-gospel-liberty>. I have removed the bold from the original quotation.

19. Russell Moore, “Is Donald Trump Right About Closing the Border to Muslims?” *russellmoore.com*, December 7, 2015, <http://www.russellmoore.com/2015/12/07/is-donald-trump-right-about-closing-the-border-to-muslims/>

20. Jim Wallis, et. al., “Called to Resist Bigotry—A Statement of Faithful Obedience”, April 29, 2016, www.calledtoresist.org.

The Bible calls on Christians to bear one another's burdens. White American Christians who respond to cultural tumult with nostalgia fail to do this. They are blinding themselves to the injustices faced by their black and brown brothers and sisters in the supposedly idyllic Mayberry of white Christian America. That world was murder, sometimes literally, for minority evangelicals.

This has gospel implications not only for minorities and immigrants but for the so-called silent majority. A vast majority of Christians, on earth and in heaven, are not white and have never spoken English. A white American Christian who disregards nativist language is in for a shock. The man on the throne in heaven is a dark-skinned, Aramaic-speaking "foreigner" who is probably not all that impressed by chants of "Make America great again."²¹

Repeatedly, these anti-Trump evangelicals gave voice to the biblical mandate for repentance and reconciliation.

In September 2016, some 80 evangelical leaders signed a statement that read, in part:

[S]ometimes historic moments arise when more is at stake than partisan politics – when the meaning and integrity of our faith hangs in the balance. . . . We believe that racism strikes at the heart of the gospel and that racial justice and reconciliation is at the core of the message of Jesus. . . . because we believe that racial bigotry has been a cornerstone of [Trump's] campaign, it is a foundational matter of the gospel for us in this election, and not just another issue. . . .

We, undersigned evangelicals, simply will not tolerate the racial, religious, and gender bigotry that Donald Trump has consistently and deliberately fueled.²²

Perhaps the anti-Trump evangelical position was best summarized by former George W. Bush speechwriter and policy advisor Michael Gerson, who wrote: "Evangelical Christian leaders, motivated by self-interest, are cozying up to a leader who has placed bigotry and malice at the center of American politics. They are defending the rights of their faith while dishonoring its essence. Genuine social influence will not come by putting Christ back into Christmas; it will come by putting Christ and his priorities back into more Christians."²³

The Argument from Evangelical Witness

While the argument from character and the argument from policy were directed against Trump and his candidacy, the argument from evangelical witness was directed by anti-Trump evangelicals to other (mostly pro-Trump) evangelicals, and concerned the nature, purpose, and direction of the evangelical movement itself.

21. Russell Moore, "A White Church No More", *New York Times*, May 6, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/06/opinion/a-white-church-no-more.html?ref=opinion&_r=1

22. "A Declaration by American Evangelicals Concerning Donald Trump", September 29, 2016, <https://www.change.org/p/donald-trump-a-declaration-by-american-evangelicals-concerning-donald-trump>.

23. Michael Gerson, "Evangelical Christians are selling out faith for politics", *Washington Post*, June 23, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/evangelical-christians-are-selling-out-faith-for-politics/2016/06/23/f03368de-3964-11e6-8f7c-d4c723a2becb_story.html?utm_term=.e6ed9e0999ee.

This argument started with the realization that there was no difference between the votes of most white evangelicals and those claiming no religious commitments. As Wallis noted: “There was absolutely no difference between the votes of other white Americans and the votes of white Christian Americans; there was no leaven, no salt, no light from white Christians to the rest of America.”²⁴ In short, white America’s so-called evangelicalism didn’t seem to make any difference.

Tony Campolo went even further, noting that “the thing that bothers me most is that evangelicals liked his [Trump’s] racist statements, his homophobic statements, his antifeminist statements, his belligerency. I mean, they loved it. What’s most disturbing is not who Donald Trump is, but what this is revealing about the consciousness of evangelicals.”²⁵ The problem, in other words, is what the campaign revealed about evangelical identity. Michael Gerson stated the issue succinctly:

Evangelical Christians are not merely choosing a certain political outcome. They are determining their public character – the way they are viewed by others and, ultimately, the way they view themselves. They are identifying with a man who has fed ethnic tension for political gain; who has proposed systemic religious discrimination; who has dramatically undermined the democratic values of civility and tolerance; who has advocated war crimes, including killing the families of terrorists; who holds a highly sexualized view of power as dominance, rather than seeing power as an instrument to advance moral ends.

In legitimizing the Republican nominee, evangelicals are not merely accepting who he is; they are changing who they are. Trumpism, at its root, involves contempt for, and fear of, outsiders – refugees, undesirable immigrants, Muslims, etc. By associating with this movement, evangelicals will bear, if not the mark of Cain, at least the mark of Trump.²⁶

Identification with such a candidacy, these writers held, could have long-term consequences for the evangelical movement. Russell Moore warned: “We should also count the cost of following Donald Trump. To do so would mean we’ve decided to join the other side of the culture war, that image and celebrity and money and power and social Darwinist ‘winning’ trump the conservation of moral principles and a just society.”²⁷ Others warned of the loss of “moral credibility”²⁸, held

24. Jim Wallis, “Resistance Is Patriotic—and Christian”, *Sojourners*, January 5, 2017, <https://sojo.net/articles/resistance-patriotic-and-christian>.

25. “Tony Campolo: Why I’m backing Hillary Clinton and supporting gay marriage”, *premier christianity.com*, November 2016, <http://www.premierchristianity.com/Past-issues/2016/November-2016/Tony-Campolo-Why-I-m-backing-Hillary-Clinton-and-supporting-gay-marriage>.

26. Michael Gerson, “Evangelicals must not bear the mark of Trump”, *Washington Post*, June 2, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/evangelicals-may-carry-the-mark-of-trump/2016/06/02/dc0f59b4-28eb-11e6-ae4a-3cdd5fe74204_story.html?utm_term=.f0f6f982fb65.

27. Russell Moore, “Have Evangelicals Who Support Trump Lost Their Values?” *New York Times*, September 17, 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/17/opinion/have-evangelicals-who-support-trump-lost-their-values.html?_r=1

28. Thabiti Anyabwile quoted in Emma Green, “The Evangelical Reckoning Over Donald Trump”, *The Atlantic*, November 10, 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/11/the-evangelical-reckoning-on-trump/507161/>

that evangelicals were “betraying a tradition”²⁹, and lamented “the damage done to the gospel witness.”³⁰

Ron Sider, president emeritus of Evangelicals for Social Action, invited readers to contemplate what the term “evangelical” has come to mean in American culture:

ESA will vigorously challenge the larger evangelical world to deal with the fact that it is now publicly and intimately identified with a political campaign that denied the science of global warming, tolerated and even appealed to racism, promoted lies (e.g. denying that President Obama is a U.S. citizen), demonstrated despicable treatment of women and embraced economic policies that will overwhelmingly help the very rich. Increasingly, that is what “evangelical” means to large numbers of Americans. That agenda contradicts biblical teaching and leads many millennials to turn away from the evangelical church and even to reject Jesus. ESA intends to be a vigorous voice challenging the evangelical world to speak, live, and act in a way that clearly and explicitly challenges that kind of agenda, an agenda that is unchristian and moves people to reject our Lord and Savior.³¹

For Sider and other anti-Trump evangelicals, it is ultimately the gospel witness itself that is at risk and thus the very future of the evangelical movement. “Enthusiasm for a candidate like Trump”, noted *Christianity Today*’s executive editor Andy Crouch, “gives our neighbors ample reason to believe that we doubt Jesus is Lord.”³² And so, in the end, in the words of Russell Moore, “the question we must ask is who ‘we’ are.”³³

Conclusion

Anti-Trump evangelicals of all political stripes collectively articulated the arguments against the Trump candidacy. Some of those arguments focused on character, some on policy positions, and some on the nature and purpose of the evangelical movement. Together, these arguments formed a powerful counternarrative to that articulated by the Religious Right in support of the Trump candidacy. Historically, this counternarrative is important because it not only challenges the dominant narrative of the last 40 years, but lays the basis for a renewed evangelicalism that is more faithful to its roots and more representative of the larger evangelical world, a world populated mostly by nonwhite, nonAmerican, and nonWestern peoples.

29. Michael Gerson, “Donald Trump presents evangelical Christians with a crucial choice”, *Washington Post*, December 14, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/conservatives-crucial-choice-reaction-or-reform/2015/12/14/37de9954-a295-11e5-b53d-972e2751f433_story.html?utm_term=.b4917741b2e4.

30. Russell Moore, “If Donald Trump has done anything, he has snuffed out the Religious Right”, *Washington Post*, October 9, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2016/10/09/if-donald-trump-has-done-anything-he-has-snuffed-out-the-religious-right/?utm_term=.9211bd79f975.

31. Ron Sider, “President-Elect Trump: A Response from ESA”, *evangelicalsforsocialaction.org*, February 21, 2017, <http://www.evangelicalsforsocialaction.org/faith-and-public-life/president-elect-trump-a-response-from-esa/>

32. Andy Crouch, “Speak Truth to Trump”, *Christianity Today*, October 10, 2016, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/channel/utilities/print.html?type=article&id=136354>

33. Russell Moore, “President Trump: Now What For the Church?” *russellmoore.com*, November 9, 2016, <http://www.russellmoore.com/2016/11/09/president-trump-now-church/>

It is, of course, paradoxical that in losing the election these anti-Trump evangelicals sought to win back the soul of their movement. It was in fact the very “losing” position into which they were placed that called forth this broad counter-argumentation, much of it firmly grounded in the Bible and in evangelical theology. If evangelicalism is once again to become the kind of movement that once encompassed “the abolitionism of William Wilberforce, the compassionate reforms of Lord Shaftesbury and the humane populism of William Jennings Bryan”³⁴, then it must recover its biblical and theological bearings. The anti-Trump evangelicals have pointed the way home.

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