

God dies, Protestants divide

By [Neil J. Young](#)

April 5, 2016

Last week, [God's Not Dead 2](#) hit the nation's movie screens. The sequel to the 2014 sleeper hit tells the story of Grace Wesley, a high school teacher dragged into court for talking about Jesus in her classroom. The movie imagines a hostile government bent on rooting out any trace of religion in public life. As the prosecuting attorney threatens, "We're going to prove once and for all that God is dead."

The timing of this film's release may have been intentional. Fifty years ago this month, *Time* magazine shocked the nation with a provocative question [splashed across its all-black cover in bold red type](#): "Is God Dead?"

Inside, the magazine followed up on a story it had first reported a few months before about a small group of "Christian atheists" who were teaching "God is dead" theology at Protestant seminaries. These "death of God" [theologians](#) argued that the church's success in the modern age depended on acknowledging that God no longer existed and, as *Time* described it, "[getting] along without him."

The *God's Not Dead* movies present the Christian faith as under attack from outside forces. But the anniversary of the *Time* cover reminds us that Christians also have encountered atheist challenges from within the fold.

However few they were, the [Christian atheists](#) from the *Time* cover story were not insignificant. But their impact lay more in Christian responses to their presence than in their theology itself. Conservative and liberal Protestant leaders took contrasting approaches, setting the stage for the very different courses evangelical and mainline Protestantism have taken since the 1960s.

Evangelicals responded vigorously, viewing "death of God" theology as a serious threat to orthodox Christianity and further proof that evangelicalism alone promotes the true Christian message. As *Christianity Today* editorialized at the time, "Never has the burden of presenting historic Christian theism fallen so heavily upon the shoulders of a vanguard of evangelical theologians."

Mainline Protestants, on the other hand, tended to ignore the controversy, shrugging off the “God is dead” folks as a small group of misfits experimenting with harmless, if laughable, ideas. Although the “death of God” movement had come out of their own seminaries, liberal Protestant leaders didn’t think it represented something that had to be taken seriously. The influential Methodist theologian Albert Outler declared in his denomination’s journal that the controversy amounted to little more than “hullabaloo.”

The *Century* mustered only a tepid response before dispatching the “death of God” movement as a hollow concern. “The living God cannot be imperiled by men who say he is dead and he needs no defense by those who say he lives,” [concluded an editorial titled “Why This Non-God Talk?”](#)

In many ways, the 1960s represented a [turning point](#) not just for the nation but also for American Christianity. Confronted with significant cultural transformations, churches had to decide where they stood on pressing matters regarding race, gender, and sexuality. Those questions joined with religious debates over biblical interpretation and Christianity’s role in public life. In this context, the “God is dead” controversy contributed to the growing divide between mainline and evangelical Protestantism, as the two branches grew further apart religiously and politically.

Evangelicals confronted the “God is dead” movement from their pulpits and in their publications, but they also rooted out any traces of liberalism within their churches, denominations, and seminaries. That made for a messy battle at times, but it hardened evangelical identity and theology. Ultimately, that confrontation strengthened evangelicalism’s identity as a counterforce to the nation’s secularizing culture and a conservative alternative to the mainline Protestantism that still dominated American religious life.

Doing so helped bring a surge of new believers. In an age of moral relativism, loosening social norms, and overall declining church attendance, millions of Americans began joining evangelical churches that took hardline cultural positions and offered a message of individual salvation rather than social justice. At the same time, mainline Protestantism entered a period of decline. While the “God is dead” controversy hardly caused that falloff, it was a significant moment in the transition.

Fifty years after *Time*’s shocking report, God is still not dead. But too many of God’s churches continue their steady demise.

Our weekly feature Then and Now harnesses the expertise of American religious historians who care about the cities of God and the cities of humans. It's published in partnership with [the Kripke Center](#) of Creighton University and edited by [Edward Carson](#), [Beth Shalom Hessel](#), and [John D. Wilsey](#).