After the personal salvation gospel

The world won't be saved by my prayers or virtuous desires.

by Angela Denker

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When I was 11, I attended a Baptist Bible camp rich in the popular theology of the 1990s and early 2000s. "Are you ready to pray the prayer and ask Jesus into your heart?" my blonde, gregarious, open-hearted camp counselor asked me.

I took a deep breath. "No," I said. "Because I know he's already there."

I thought of this when I read the recent essay by Laura Turner, daughter of megachurch pastor John Ortberg, reflecting on her evangelical upbringing and the different paths her youth group friends have taken. The article crystallized some things for me. It brought together what I've seen traveling the country interviewing people for my book *Red State Christians*, what I've witnessed in the downfall of so many evangelical giants, and what I've felt inside myself: that something is deeply amiss in American Christianity, and that something new might be rising in its place.

I am Turner's age, 34, and while I share some of her memories of evangelical youth culture—yes, I did take an excused absence from public school to attend a day-long purity retreat—I've also spent much of my time on the sidelines of that culture. I went to seminary and was ordained in a mainline denomination (Lutheran). And unlike many of my fellow female Christian writers, I'm not the daughter of a pastor.

My dad was not a Promise Keeper but a lapsed Catholic. He watched his mom devote her life to the church only to suffer tragedy after tragedy. He attended an overcrowded and sometimes violent Catholic grade school, only to learn later that his priest had been among those on a list of abusers in the Archdiocese of Saint Paul and Minneapolis. He grew up to kind of hate the church—though he did tolerate the rest of us going to weekly services, and he even briefly taught Sunday school for the sake of the family.

That was at the Lutheran church, my mom's tradition. Her dad had been a pastor, but in contrast to the evangelical success stories of the late 20th century, my grandpa toiled in the relative salt mines of mainline Lutheranism during the 60s and 70s. After divorcing when his children were high schoolers, he was forced to leave his church. He never quite regained his footing as a Lutheran pastor, even up until his death earlier this year.

My grandpa's faith was mighty. It was also not something that could be rooted in a personal salvation story. His personal story was one of great promise and great loss—of high expectations and disappointment and poverty and broken relationships and familial mental illness and addiction and a Savior who was willing to walk into the murk of it all. The triumphalist faith of Willow Creek and its late-20th-century counterparts never quite worked for my family of Lutherans and Catholics. We held within us too many stories of tragedy and poverty, of struggle and loss.

When my camp counselor encouraged me to ask Jesus into my heart, the idea didn’t fit into what I already knew about God’s sovereignty and power. Deeply rooted inside of me, at war with the popular evangelical theology of the day, was a more orthodox belief—one that relied not on my own desire for God but on God's desire and love for me.

At my suburban midwestern high school, I longed for the comparative fervor of my more conservative Christian friends. They gathered at the flagpole and protested the creation of a Straight-Gay Alliance. Their conviction was both alluring and scary. There was "an urgency to faith when we were young, a need to get it right that made everything else feel unimportant,” writes Turner. “This is a story about what happens when you—when I—lose that urgency." Her urgency came because she and her friends believed that they, ordinary human beings, had immense power to effect salvation, not only their own but others' as well. They had to pray a prayer, they had to be pure, and they had to convince others to pray the same prayer—and maybe also to listen to the same music and embrace the same sexual ethics as they did.

Turner's story is a personal one, rooted in specific details of one of America's largest megachurches and its eventual downturn. But the phenomenon she talks about is rooted in a theological misstep that has devastated popular American Christianity for decades. Americans have long vested too much of salvation into human hands, taking a faith that insists upon a God who loved and acted first—prior to human action and individuality—and foisting on it a can-do, frontier independence.

But a world ruled by sin and death cannot long sustain a theology based on human power. To grow up is to learn that you are but a grain of sand in a world wracked by earthquakes, floods, and a human propensity to violence and greed. No prayer or virtuous desire can save this world—not even a band of teenagers united by the confidence of their religious convictions.

The popularization of an individualistic salvation earned by prayer and human righteousness has done wide damage. It perpetuated a white Christianity in which you could ignore your African American neighbor—except to encourage him to pray and repent personally, to accept Jesus Christ as his personal Lord and Savior, even as the structures of a so-called Christian government conspired against his people. It absolved the church of responsibility for establishing and sustaining communities of believers, the church’s raison d'être for millennia.

Meanwhile, Christians who had long insisted on God's sovereignty and the importance of the community wondered why their churches didn't have stadium seating. Megachurch founders made millions selling "church growth" principles to small congregations. While they had some good ideas, their principal product was not Jesus but themselves.

Was it any surprise that churches raised on an ethic of individual salvation turned out to be vulnerable to personality cults and abuses of power? What was the church for anyway, except to bolster the individual?

Today, the people in Turner's essay can only wander the wreckage of popular evangelicalism. The tide has turned in the U.S. (though Mark Driscoll is still trying to sell his sermon notes).

Our country has, however, outsourced its individualistic Christian salvation. Perhaps our siblings in the Global South and elsewhere will be more discerning, will dwell more in a Bible that insists it is God who chooses, God who redeems, God alone who is worthy of worship—not us, no matter how many times we accept Jesus into our hearts.

As for us, our American Christianity is a hollowed-out shell in search of a center. Some people have looked to ex-evangelical writers, many of them women and LGBTQ people who are refugees from a personal salvation gospel that so often dehumanized them and made them the bearers of sin. ("If you occupied a female body," writes Turner, "you often came away from a talk about sex feeling bad about yourself.") Their stories help to pinpoint exactly where the church went so wrong. But do they offer hope for a wandering and depressed Christian body?

I look for hope elsewhere. A few Sundays ago I preached at a Lutheran congregation that has worshiped on a corner in South Minneapolis for more than 125 years. The sanctuary doesn't have air conditioning, so I wore only a stole for vestments, along with a clip-on microphone that worked better in some spots than others. Attendees strolled in lackadaisically. There was no child care, no announcement on a screen for a particular parent to leave discreetly and attend to their baby in the nursery. Our singing was clumsy and the hymns plodded. We could have used more technology, more A/C, more of the trappings of successful American Christian culture.

I preached anyway—from Luke's Gospel, chapter 10, verse 2. Jesus is sending out disciples into the surrounding area, 70 of them, to basically go door-to-door and

share the good news. "The harvest is plentiful," Jesus tells the 70. "But the laborers are few."

These words can be hard to swallow. I love large churches, love preaching to a crowd while using a screen. But 87 percent of white evangelicals voted for a president who promised to deny humanitarian help to migrants and citizens alike. If Christians have learned anything in this era, we might know that the gospel of Jesus and the story of the Good Samaritan are not always palatable to the majority.

Instead of the personal salvation gospel, this new era we're in might encourage us to embrace a different salvation ethic: one in which our redemption relies on God and on one another more than on ourselves. In that small, stifling sanctuary in Minneapolis, with few laborers, I saw a faith that has endured—on the basis of something richer than a personal prayer or a personal Savior.

I find hope as well in my memory of worshiping at the Arabic Christian Church in Houston last year (after leaving worship at Joel Osteen's megachurch just up the road). The people there had come from Lebanon and Syria and Jordan, from Jesus' own region. They had been taxed and persecuted and beaten for their beliefs. They called themselves evangelicals, melding their homeland's ethic of hospitality and community with an American hope in the value of the individual.

They had learned, it seemed, to embrace individuals and support their needs—without confusing individual affirmation with individual salvation. They could be unique Christians, connected individually to Jesus, without forgetting that salvation comes to us from beyond ourselves.

When I asked these Middle Eastern Christians about the future of American Christianity and American politics, many of them shrugged. They took the long view. They had to, because that was how their faith had survived more than 2,000 years, and what had brought them here to the so-called promised land, together, in the shadow of their Savior.