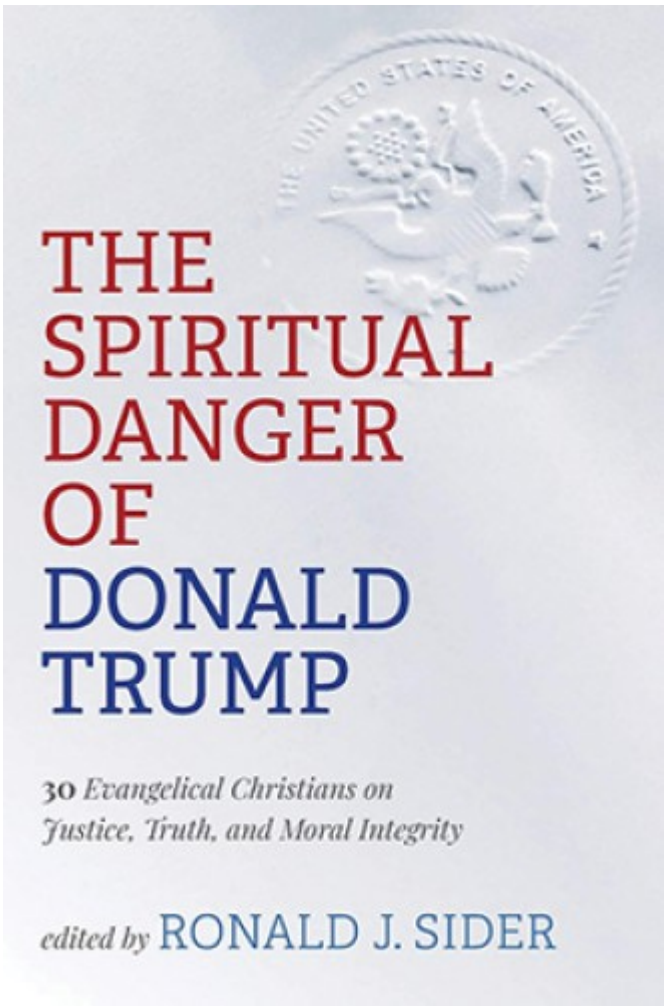
Prominent evangelical scholars are, once again, disavowing Trump

They’re brave to do so. Do they go far enough?

by Greg Carey in the September 9, 2020 issue

In Review



The Spiritual Danger of Donald Trump

30 Evangelical Christians on Justice, Truth, and Moral Integrity

Edited by Ronald J. Sider
Cascade Books

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Not all evangelical Christians support Donald Trump. African American, Latino, and Asian American evangelicals typically condemn his racist character and the racist politics of his movement. And white evangelical support for Trump began slipping even before he teargassed peaceful protesters so he could be photographed awkwardly holding a Bible in front of St. John's Church. But the overwhelming majority of white evangelicals supported Trump's run for the White House, and they remain his most secure base of support. That leaves many who are outside the movement or on its margins baffled.

Ethicist Ronald J. Sider and two colleagues have gathered 30 evangelical writers, most of whom are white and male, to warn their fellow believers about the dangers posed by the Trump presidency. These writers are frustrated. "The enthusiastic, uncritical embrace of President Trump is among the most mind-blowing developments of the Trump era," laments conservative columnist Peter Wehner. Historian John Fea recalls his "anger and frustration upon learning that 81 percent of my fellow evangelicals had voted" for Trump.

A former Southern Baptist, I too am perplexed as to how a movement that promotes "biblical family values" could overwhelmingly support a leader notorious for adultery, self-confessed sexual assault, overweening greed, disregard for the truth, and fundamental disrespect for other people. Thus, I applaud Sider and his collaborators. Their arguments are timely, pointed, and passionate.

At the same time, the essays in this volume fail to reckon adequately with the forces that draw evangelicals to Trump. That accounting is necessary for evangelicalism's healing.

This is not the first time prominent white evangelicals have tried to alienate their peers from Trump. In April 2018, 50 evangelical leaders gathered at Wheaton College's Billy Graham Center to ponder "the challenges of distortions to evangelicalism that have permeated both the media and culture since the 2016 election." In late 2019, *Christianity Today*'s retiring editor-in-chief Mark Galli (one of the contributors to *Spiritual Danger*) published an article entitled "Trump Should Be Removed from Office."

The book's most repeated anti-Trump argument is a pragmatic one: supporting Trump gives evangelicals a bad name and hurts their cause. Several authors, keenly

aware that research from before Trump's candidacy shows many younger adults are turned off by the perceived politicization of the church, express their hope that it's not too late for evangelicals to right the ship. That motive is less self-serving than it may appear to outsiders, as evangelicals value nothing more than winning people to the gospel.

Other concerns figure prominently as well. Several authors note the hypocrisy of a movement that condemned Bill Clinton for his sexual misconduct but now rationalizes Trump's presidency. Stephen Haynes points out that in response to Trump, evangelicals have given up their traditional convictions regarding the morality of political leaders: in 2011 only 30 percent of evangelicals affirmed that elected officials who had committed immoral acts could still serve effectively, but by October 2016 that number had increased to 70 percent. During the Clinton presidency, observes Steven E. Meyer, Southern Baptists passed a resolution on moral character in elected officials. Trump's presidency has elicited no such action. Several authors devote all or most of their essays to Trump's moral failings, including foolishness, arrogance, and disregard for the poor. Irene Fowler claims that Trump mocks Christian values, enumerating seven specific virtues rejected by the president.

Some of the essays involve more overt theological analysis. When Christians align themselves too closely to a political program, place undue trust in a political leader, or identify the church with a national vision, these authors note, our trust is misplaced. Chris Thurman grieves that Trump's evangelical supporters demean his critics as "immoral, spineless, demonic, prideful, blind, stupid, and lacking in grace." Such absolute and unqualified devotion to Trump by influential evangelicals particularly rankles some authors. It would be one thing if evangelicals supported Trump's appointment of pro-life judges, they argue, while critiquing Trump's failures in other respects. That doesn't happen.

One chapter stands out from the rest. Its authors—J. Samuel Escobar, David S. Lim, and D Zac Niringiye—represent Peru, the Philippines, and Uganda. The chapter opens with a stunning document, "A Call to Biblical Faithfulness Amid the New Fascism," issued the day before Trump's inauguration by the International Fellowship for Mission as Transformation. The document speaks beyond the American situation, addressing more generally the global rise of populist authoritarianism. But its release date says everything.

Significantly, these are the only three authors in the volume who label Trumpism for what it is: a strain of fascism that blends authoritarianism, nationalism, and racism. The “Call to Biblical Faithfulness” singles out the contributions of evangelicals to this global trend:

> As followers of Jesus, we also feel compelled to issue this call because we find it disturbing that many self-identified evangelicals in their respective countries contributed in no small part to the new fascism by the way they voted in a number of recent referenda (e.g., Colombia, United Kingdom) and national elections (e.g., Philippines, United States).

The document, along with three accompanying mini-essays, presents the most thorough indictment of white evangelical Trumpism in the volume.

In addition to critiquing Trump and his politics, several of the collection’s authors attempt to explain why so many white evangelicals would support Trump. One issue is abortion, which surely motivates many evangelicals. If one understands abortion as the unjust taking of human life, then abortion is the great moral scandal of our age—an issue worthy of determining every vote.

Historian Randall Balmer points out in his essay that evangelicals held no consensus on abortion through most of the 1970s. For example, in 1968 *Christianity Today* devoted a special issue to abortion and birth control that reflected diverse opinions among evangelical scholars. In the 1970s, Southern Baptists passed three resolutions supporting reproductive choice. Balmer’s thesis, well known among historians, is that right-wing Christians first united to defend segregated schools like Bob Jones University from losing federal privileges. Knowing segregation would not sell, they adopted opposition to abortion and homosexuality as rallying cries for their mobilization effort. Complementarianism, a euphemism for women’s subordination, emerged later.

Sider famously called evangelicals to become *Completely Pro-Life*, the title of a 1987 book in which he insisted that a consistent pro-life ethic works against nuclear war, poverty, and capital punishment. That book profoundly influenced me when I was engaged in social ministry through the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board, a ministry inconceivable today.

Several authors in the present volume embrace Sider's concerns and would add the climate crisis as a pro-life issue. However abortion climbed to the top of evangelical priority lists, and even if those who fund right-wing politics apply abortion as leverage for other aims, millions of evangelicals sincerely understand abortion as murder. That conviction all but compels their support for Trump.

Another issue surfaces prominently in the volume, though authors identify it in different ways. Meyer writes of evangelicals who believe that Christianity "is under attack by dark, foreboding powers. It is a struggle between good and evil, a struggle as old as humanity." Wehner characterizes the issue as "an existential struggle against a wicked enemy . . . American liberals and the left." Other authors, prominently Fea, use the word *fear*.

Rightly or wrongly, many evangelicals interpret LGBTQ rights, including legal mandates that support them, as an attack on the viability of their movement. These concerns go back at least to the debates over prayer in public schools. A persecution complex characterizes much of evangelical spirituality, a fear I recall vividly from my youth. Films popular among evangelicals (such as *God's Not Dead* and its sequels) dramatize this phenomenon.

The authors in this volume generally show sympathy for evangelical fear rather than subject it to critical examination. George Yancey claims that the fear is justified, since the broader culture expresses hostility to Christians, what he calls *Christianophobia*. "Christianophobia is real. I have studied it and debated with those who do not believe it exists. Trump has promised to protect Christians. The seeking of political control is one way to deal with Christianophobia. But it is the wrong way."

With the exception of Escobar, Lim, and Niringiye, the authors universally avoid the role Christian nationalism plays in this cultural narrative. Christian nationalism is the belief that America was founded as a Christian nation on biblical principles and that those same biblical principles, as interpreted by a narrow group of evangelical Christians, should govern public affairs. It's a well-organized and deeply funded movement. Christian nationalists interpret religious liberty as the freedom to do what they believe is right, regardless of how it affects the rights of others. Recent research by evangelical sociologists Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry attributes white evangelical fear to racism and xenophobia. In Christian nationalism, they argue, American identity implies whiteness.

Here is where I begin to struggle with this book. The authors are evangelicals, an identity we should expect them to cherish and defend. Evangelicals bring precious gifts to the church. They cultivate a warm, personal piety. They take the Bible and theology seriously as resources for imagining what faithful living looks like. They celebrate their faith in public ways. I've heard Tony Campolo say that if a village needs fresh water, it's likely evangelicals who will come and dig.

Yet the authors of *Spiritual Danger* generally do not examine the core of evangelical life to explain Trump's appeal. It is accurate to attribute white evangelicals' embrace of Trump to abortion and the culture wars. But those explanations are also incomplete. A few chapters critique evangelicalism for its addiction to political power, but most of the authors interpret evangelicalism through their own commitments. They treat Trump as a danger from outside the movement rather than as a symptom of the movement's own dynamics.

It's one thing to decry Trump's misogyny, but that complaint requires that we assess the prevalence of women's subordination in evangelical life. One may condemn Trump's racism, but those protests ring hollow without accounting for the massive streams of southern and midwestern evangelicalism that defended slavery, then advocated segregation, and arguably still pursue racist politics. One may call evangelicals to accept scientific expertise regarding climate change and COVID-19, but evangelicalism's fundamentalist stream has long rejected natural science, social science, historiography, and critical biblical scholarship.

Whiteness may have more to do with the problem than does fundamentalism. Just before the 2016 election, the Public Religion Research Institute estimated that white evangelicals favored Trump over Hillary Clinton 66–17. White mainline Protestants favored Trump 49–39, and white Catholics 48–41. Everybody else surveyed favored Clinton. In short, Trump relies on white people for his support—and on white evangelicals to an extraordinary degree. Whiteness is Trump's greatest political advantage.

As valuable as this volume is, its authors rarely identify *white* evangelicalism as the core problem. Nonwhite evangelicals almost always reject Trump. When we're talking about American politics, every general reference to evangelicalism falls short: it's all about whiteness.

This is not to say that white evangelicals who support Trump are all overt racists. Some of Trump's white supporters instead tolerate, perhaps even deny, the racism of his rhetoric and his politics because they follow him for other reasons. Nevertheless, research shows a strong overlap between evangelical fear and white fear, between evangelical resentment and white resentment. This is how racial politics work: not primarily by voicing explicit racism, but by speaking to white people's particular alienation and anxiety.

I hope this volume will convince many evangelicals to reassess their support for Donald Trump. Sider and his colleagues have mobilized important voices to attest that support for Trump is incompatible with an evangelical witness. Collectively their arguments embrace diverse fundamental evangelical values: personal morality, piety, honesty, compassion, and trust in divine providence. And while some of these authors have expanded their audiences by opposing Trump, others have a great deal to lose. When people like Galli and Southern Baptist ethicist Russell Moore have criticized Trump, the backlash has been intense. It takes courage to do what these authors have done.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Another evangelical intervention."