

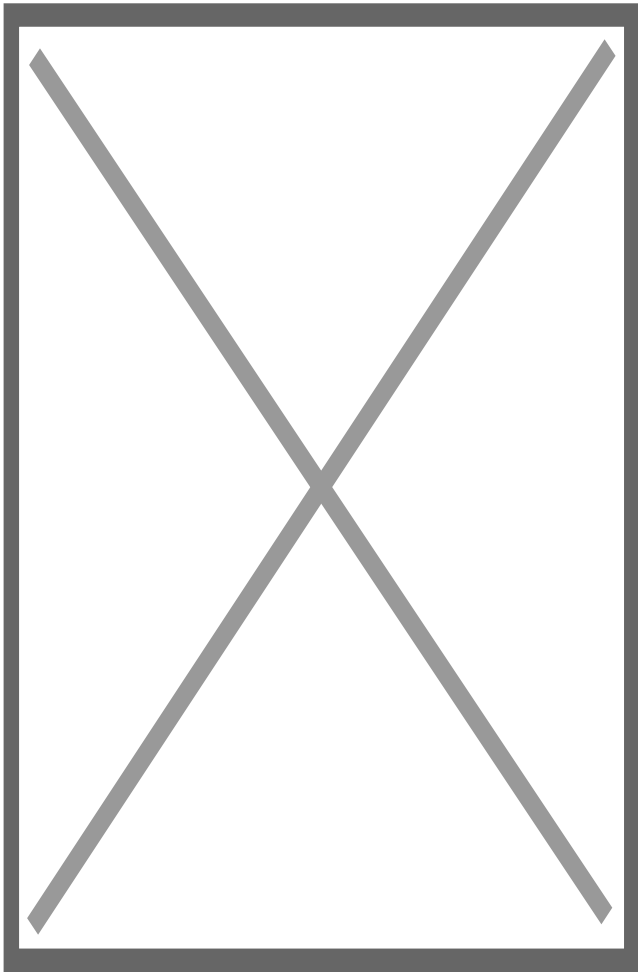
Who gets to define Christianity?

David Congdon links postliberal theology to the exclusionary politics of the Christian right.

by [William J. Schultz](#) in the [December 2025](#) issue

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In Review



Who Is a True Christian?

Contesting Religious Identity in American Culture

By David W. Congdon
Cambridge University Press

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RW-REPLACE-TOKEN

Who Is a True Christian? is an ambitious book. It draws together theology, politics, and culture to provide both a diagnosis of and a solution to our contemporary crisis. And while it may not always succeed in its ambitious aims, even its failures are interesting.

David Congdon, author of several previous books on the theology of Rudolf Bultmann, argues that modern Christianity is defined by an ongoing quest for the “true” meaning of the faith. Many such seekers have tried to articulate a rule of faith that will establish the right way to practice Christianity once and for all. Congdon condemns this search as exclusionary, even authoritarian. We should, he argues, call off the search for true Christianity and instead embrace a diversity of beliefs and practices.

To make this case, Congdon provides a history of what we might call Christian anti-liberalism in the latter part of the 20th century. He focuses on a loosely connected group of Protestant thinkers, many of them evangelical, who sought an alternative to liberal theology. Ironically, as Congdon notes, their rejection of liberalism was itself an outgrowth of the liberal impulse to redefine Christianity for the modern age. What does it mean to be a modern Christian? Liberals answered this question one way. Postliberals gave a very different answer: theologians like Hans Frei and George Lindbeck argue that Christianity is not a set of beliefs but is instead a self-contained culture that can only be understood from within. Claims that might seem outlandish to outsiders make perfect sense to participants in this culture.

The flip side of the postliberal argument was that, if Christianity could only be understood from within, it could never truly be understood by outsiders. Postliberals thus offered a vision of a world divided into mutually incomprehensible cultures, each with its own logic. It was, essentially, the application of cultural relativism to theology. But while proponents of cultural relativism argued that no culture could be judged superior to another, many postliberals went a step further and added a normative twist to the argument. The world might be divided into different and incommensurable cultures, but that does not mean all cultures are equal. Christianity is the culture which *ought* to govern one’s life.

Thus, Congdon argues, postliberal theology had an elective affinity with the Christian right. Conservative evangelicals (and, later, conservative Catholics) recognized the political value of speaking in terms of culture, culture clashes, and culture wars. Their goal, after all, was to win American culture for Christ by turning their subculture into American culture writ large. Viewing the world the way postliberals did—as a clash of cultures in which Christianity needs to triumph—spurred many previously quiescent evangelicals into the realm of politics.

By linking postliberal theology with Christian right politics, *Who Is a True Christian?* takes part in an ongoing conversation about the meaning of the word *evangelicals*. Scholars once defined that word primarily in theological terms. Evangelicalism is a set of propositions about faith, and the people who assent to these propositions are evangelicals. But the fervor with which evangelicals embraced Donald Trump led many scholars—some evangelical, some not—to reconsider that definition. Kristin Kobes Du Mez’s blockbuster *Jesus and John Wayne*, published in the midst of the 2020 presidential campaign, brought this conversation to the attention of a broader public. Du Mez—building on the work of scholars like Timothy Gloege, Daniel Vaca, Darren Dochuk, Anthea Butler, Darren Grem, and Sarah Hammond—argues that evangelicalism is not a theology but a culture. It is, moreover, a culture defined by racism, misogyny, and American chauvinism. In this telling, evangelical support for Trump is not a deviation from but the fulfillment of American evangelicalism.

Congdon agrees wholeheartedly, defining evangelicalism as “an apocalyptic offshoot of American culture defined by networks of corporate influence and political power.” What he adds to the existing literature is a close attention to theology. He argues that the Christian romance with authoritarianism is the inevitable product of the obsession with finding the true rule of faith. Orthodoxy in religion leads to conservatism, even fascism, in

politics. This is an important contribution, and to some degree an important challenge, to revisionist accounts of evangelicalism which, in their focus on politics and culture, leave theology out entirely.

So far, I have dealt only with the historical, descriptive aspect of *Who Is a True Christian?* But the book also has a constructive aspect. To replace the endless search for orthodoxy, Congdon proposes a countervailing principle, that of polydoxy. We must accept that there is no way to define true Christianity, says Congdon. Everyone ought to determine for themselves what “Christianity” means, rather than relying on a definition handed down from someone else. In Congdon’s own words, “everyone must embrace heresy.”

If the postliberals sought to apply cultural relativism to theology, Congdon responds with a dose of pragmatism. He writes of the need for “theological disobedience,” defined as “a mode of religious practice that willingly disregards scripture, creeds, and confessions when they fail to suit the needs of the moment.” It is a compelling vision, especially now, when the United States is ruled by a political movement that seeks to return to an imagined past. Yet it is also vulnerable to the same critiques which have always dogged pragmatism. Perhaps most importantly, who gets to define the “needs of the moment”? Congdon treats these needs as self-evident, but even those who share his progressive sympathies might have strong disagreements about which issues are the most pressing and how they should be addressed. Eliza Griswold’s *Circle of Hope*, reviewed in these pages last year (“Inside a church’s implosion,” October 2024), provides a cautionary tale about a progressive church that tore itself apart debating the needs of the moment.

Ultimately *Who Is a True Christian?* is as much a symptom of the present crisis as it is a diagnosis. Congdon seems to accept that the very idea of orthodoxy is inherently right-wing. He speaks about the need to break “the imperialism of the past upon the present.” But doing so means forfeiting any claim that progressive Christians might have to interpreting their own history, handing over the entirety of the Christian tradition—something which is still very important in American culture—to Christian nationalists. To reject any concern with the past is, I worry, to reduce Christianity to a consumer good, to be used and discarded.

Granted, calling a book a “symptom” does not sound like a compliment. But in spite of these concerns, I still believe *Who Is a True Christian?* is a very important book. It is an admirably serious attempt to understand our present situation in both historical and theological terms. Anyone concerned with Christian nationalism, the Christian right, or related topics ought to read—and engage with—this book.