

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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What Is Evangelical Christianity's Place in Postmodern America?

The role of evangelical Protestant Christianity in the development of America has been profound. The linkage between the First Great Awakening and the decision for independence from Great Britain is incontrovertible. Consequently, the desire for both political liberty and religious liberty energized the independence movement (see Thomas S. Kidd, *God of Liberty: A Religious History of the American Revolution*). Evangelical Christianity therefore maintained its location at American culture's center until the waves of immigration began in the late 19th and into the early 20th centuries, when Protestant evangelicalism competed with Roman Catholicism and Judaism for the cultural center. Into the 20th century, especially after the immigration laws were changed in the 1960s, new religious faiths entered American culture, including Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam, among others. The religious liberty guaranteed by the First Amendment took on a new meaning as these more diverse faiths became more numerous and more vocal; American pluralism now meant religious pluralism. As a result of this staggering diversity, American culture in its postmodern phase has adopted a rather radical secularism in which religious discourse of any kind is largely abandoned and now barred from public discourse, policymaking and adjudication by the courts. The public square is now naked when it comes to religion, especially evangelical Christianity. Protestant evangelical Christianity is a distinct minority, marginalized from setting the culture's agenda, and, consequently, its values, morals and ethical standards, all sourced in the Bible, seem strange and weird to this Postmodern, Post-Christian culture.

How has evangelical Christianity responded to this "disestablishment"? Tragically, some evangelicals see the theatrical egocentrism of Donald Trump as the answer. In doing so, evangelicals are declaring that character in a candidate does not matter. Trump is an aggressive megalomaniac who lacks a basic moral compass for his life. As Russel Moore, President of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, has argued, "we should count the cost of following Donald Trump. To do so would mean that 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." Instead of following the pompous Trump, evangelical Christians should consider another path. Moore contends that the goal for evangelicals is wrapped around the gospel, not simply "making America great again." Moore: "America is important. But the end goal of the gospel is not a Christian America. The end goal of the gospel is redeemed from every tribe and tongue and nation and language We belong to another kingdom."

What Moore and other evangelical leaders are advocating is that evangelicals recognize that we are now a moral minority. Moore suggests that evangelicals must not see themselves "as a

cultural majority. Change does not come from a position of power, but a position of witness.” Christians are thus by definition countercultural. This is a new understanding that evangelicals must recognize. As the above paragraphs have shown, for many decades evangelicals were at the center of American culture, shaping and molding its agenda. No longer! To be countercultural is not only to stand for the innate value of the human fetus and oppose abortion; not only to stand for the clear biblical teaching of heterosexual, monogamous, Christ-centered marriages; not only to stand for the values, morals and ethical standards of our God. To be countercultural means also to stand against the ghastly practice of human trafficking, to stand against the policies that create massive human tragedies such as the refugee crisis in the Middle East, and to stand against the oppression and exploitation of the poor.

One of the significant leaders in this call to countercultural evangelicalism is David Platt. His books, *Radical* and more recently *A Compassionate Call to Counterculture*, articulate the agenda and priorities for evangelicals interested in countercultural Christianity. For evangelical leaders such as Platt and Moore, the Apostle Paul is a perfect example of countercultural living. In many ways, there is a compelling similarity between the 1st century and the 21st century: Deplorable sexual immorality, with its subsequent dysfunction and human pain; pervasive religious pluralism; an entitlement state that taxes relentlessly but fails to provide necessary governmental functions; and a culture that generates enough wealth so that self-indulgence and abhorrent materialism replace any sense of public virtue or community. The church of Jesus Christ in such a culture can only be defined as countercultural. Those who advocate for a countercultural evangelicalism also cite William Wilberforce, whose faith energized the antislavery movement in the British Empire in the late 18th into the early 19th centuries, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was martyred for his adamant opposition to the Nazi agenda, including its anti-Semitism. The gospel transforms people and as people are transformed culture changes. Change agents for Jesus Christ are those who see the gospel as the key to changing the world.

Did the recent visit of Pope Francis to the United States provide a model for countercultural evangelicals? It was arguably quite refreshing to see the extraordinary humility of Pope Francis manifested that week, especially in contrast to the bombastic bluster of Donald Trump. He talked the talk of countercultural Christianity: He declared that “humans cannot be reduced to the sum of their consumption or the total of their pleasures;” “that humans cannot be exploited or abused without defacing the divine;” that Christians must be concerned about the Syrian refugee crisis, about the treatment of prisoners, about family life and about children facing “the hopeless maze of violence, abuse and despair.” He advocated for the environment and for economic justice. The Bible has much to say about all of these things and they are all important to God. However, that Pope Francis did not specifically mention abortion and same-sex marriage has emboldened the religious left, for their causes are the environment, immigration and redistributive economics. What was missing from the multiple speeches of Pope Francis was the clarity of the gospel, which is the key to transformation—of individuals and of culture. Columnist Ross Douthat, himself a Roman Catholic, issues a profound warning about a Pope “Francis-inspired revival”: “One is the tendency for a liberal-leaning faith to simply become a secularized faith, obsessed with political utopias and embarrassed by

supernatural hopes The other is religious liberalism's urge to follow secular liberalism in embracing the sexual revolution and all its works—a move that promises renewal but rarely delivers, because it sells out far too much of scripture and tradition along the way.”

I strongly believe that countercultural evangelicalism is the path 21st century American Christians must choose. We are clearly a minority in American culture, and the values, morals and ethical standards of this culture are not ours! We are not cultural warriors, but “bondservants” of Jesus Christ who both live and proclaim the gospel, and, in doing so, are peacemakers in a world of disorder, conflict and dysfunction. The Apostle Paul counseled his young disciple, Timothy, with these words in 2 Timothy 2:21-26:

²¹ Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from these *things*, he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified, useful to the Master, prepared for every good work. ²² Now flee from youthful lusts and pursue righteousness, faith, love *and* peace, with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart. ²³ But refuse foolish and ignorant speculations, knowing that they produce quarrels. ²⁴ The Lord's bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, ²⁵ with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth, ²⁶ and they may come to their senses *and escape* from the snare of the devil, having been held captive by him to do his will. [NASB]

May we live these words as countercultural Christians.

See Russell Moore in the *New York Times* (17 September 2015); Sarah Pulliam Bailey, “Moore on the Margins,” *Christianity Today* (September 2015), pp. 31-39; Molly Worthen in *New York Times* (27 September 2015); and Ross Douthat in the *New York Times* (27 September 2015).