

The Allegiance of White American Evangelicals to Donald Trump

Kenneth Bieber and Jaco Beyers

Department of Religion Studies, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

ken@riverterrace.org

jaco.beyers@up.ac.za

Abstract

This article discusses why American evangelical Christians, particularly white evangelicals, have granted overwhelming support to Donald Trump, first as a presidential candidate in 2016, and then as president since his inauguration in January 2017. The loyalty afforded to him by this voting bloc results in an abandonment of the values and priorities of the greater Christian mission, exchanging faithful discipleship for political expediency. While this demographic of voters does not explicitly renounce the Christian faith or their belief in the authority of Scripture, the concerns exhibited in their fidelity to President Trump as a monarchical figure stand in contrast to both biblically-based evangelicalism and historic American political values.

Keywords: evangelicalism; white evangelicalism; Donald Trump; Trumpism; Cyrus; authoritarianism; Christian nationalism

1 Introduction

During the past few years, the activity of reporting, opining, and publishing books on the Trump Presidency has become an industry within itself. The surprising relationship between Trump and evangelical Christians will certainly be the focus of sociological, cultural, historical, and theological studies for decades to come, as his personal character and actions would appear to contradict the core of what much of evangelicalism is supposed to stand for. This present study considers white Americans who self-identify as evangelical, but in showing fidelity to his leadership, hold and act on values that are opposite to the values of historic evangelical Christianity. In so doing, they effectively look at Trump as a monarchical figure out of fear as they try to restore and maintain a position of privilege with white nationalism. One might suppose that evangelicalism, with its emphasis on personal conversion and missionary work, would prioritize missional concerns, but, as this present study demonstrates, such is not the case. This paper first offers a definition of evangelicalism and then delineates between evangelicalism in general and white American evangelicalism in particular. The study then considers how the allegiance given by white evangelicals to Trump betrays the values that are both biblical, and historically American.

2 Evangelicalism in the United States

Throughout its history, the movement known as evangelicalism has exhibited a set of core values, termed by British historian David Bebbington as a “quadrilateral of priorities.”¹ He identifies these “four qualities that have been the special marks” of evangelical Christians “as *conversionism*, the belief that lives need to be changed; *activism*, the expression of the gospel in effort; *Biblicism*, a particular regard for the Bible; and what may be called *crucicentrism*, a stress on the sacrifice of Christ on the cross.”² Bebbington’s formulation has become a standard definition for descriptions of the movement, even beyond English-speaking society. To show how these characteristics have played out historically, Frances Fitzgerald summarizes the background and history of evangelicalism coming out of the larger Christian tradition:

The word “evangelical” comes from the Greek “evangel,” meaning the “good news,” or “the Gospel.” While the word could be claimed by all Christians, evangelical became the common name for the revivals that swept the English-speaking world in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In America the series of revivals, known as the First and the Second Great Awakenings, with their emphasis on simple Bible preaching and immediate conversion, touched virtually all Protestant denominations. For most of the nineteenth century almost all Protestants would have called themselves evangelicals in the sense that they believed they had been born again in Christ and had a duty to evangelize, or spread the good news of the Gospels in America and abroad.³

Evangelicalism resides within the larger Christian tradition, and currently in American society Christianity continues to hold its position as the dominant religion. The Pew Research Center reports that Christians in general comprise 65% of the U.S. population.⁴ As the share of the white population declines, while different ethnic groups continue to grow, the percentage “of U.S. adults who are white born-again or evangelical Protestants now stands at 16%,” which is “down from 19% a decade ago.”⁵ Within evangelical Protestantism, Pew estimated in 2014 that the movement breaks down into the demographics of whites with the largest representation at 76%, followed by Latino at 11%, and then black at 6%, Asian at 2%, and Other/Mixed comprising the last 5%.⁶

Set against both the larger historical backdrop along with the current demographic composition of evangelicalism, it is important to note that what is termed the current evangelical movement in the U.S. arose in the mid-twentieth century. The movement took shape in an attempt to distinguish itself from the negative tone of the fundamentalist movement from the early decades of that century. Within American Protestantism, fundamentalists had broken from Mainline Protestants, which they viewed as having conceded the authority of Scripture to the science and thought of modernity. Historian of American religion at Baylor University, Thomas Kidd, recounts that in response “By the early 1940s, a number of evangelical leaders worked to move beyond fundamentalism to craft an intellectually robust, culturally engaged form of conservative Protestantism.”⁷ Kidd identifies these leaders as “neo-evangelicals,” explaining that they “remained concerned about modernism, but they also partnered with diverse Christian groups in order to present the gospel in a forceful yet winsome way.”⁸ The best known of these new public figures was Billy Graham (1918-2018), who became a world-famous evangelist and unofficial advisor to U.S. presidents. Having re-engaged with mainstream society in the 1940s and 1950s, a few decades later, evangelical voters were led by the pastor Jerry Falwell (1933-2007) to engage

with politics in the late 1970s and early 1980s as supporters of Ronald Reagan, subsequently voting for other Republican candidates.⁹

3 White Evangelical Support for Trump

Though a minority of the overall American electorate, white evangelicals comprise a committed voting bloc and so make up one of the strongest, most essential groups of Donald Trump's support. As John Fea reports, "On November 8, 2016, 81 percent of self-described white evangelicals helped to vote Donald Trump into the White House."¹⁰ Surprisingly, a "higher percentage of evangelicals voted for Trump than did for George W. Bush in 2000 and 2004, John McCain in 2008, and Mitt Romney in 2012."¹¹ Fea suggests that, even though the white evangelical vote helped Trump win the electoral college vote in 2016, "we should probably see his success among these voters as part of a last-ditch attempt—a kind of Pickett's Charge,¹² if you will—to win the culture wars."¹³ The current battle over social and moral values due to these changes, combined with demographic trends, causes anxiety for white evangelicals. Although the U.S. Census reports that "non-Hispanic Whites are projected to remain the single largest race group throughout the next 40 years,"¹⁴ that group is forecast to hold a minority position within American society. Starting in 2045, "they are no longer projected to make up the majority of the U.S. population."¹⁵ Concerning this proportional decline, Robert Jones explains, "After more than two centuries of white Anglo-Saxon Protestant dominance, the United States has moved from being a majority-white Christian nation to one with no single racial and religious majority."¹⁶ The demographics work against the white evangelical constituency, because as Fea reports, the "average Trump voter is fifty-seven years old," and most of the evangelical leaders who support him "are old and white."¹⁷ In his role as a college professor, Fea reports, "Younger evangelicals, the kind that I teach every day, do not seem to share their parents' and grandparents' political playbook. The culture wars are not going well for this latter demographic group."¹⁸

Now in the minority with population projections titled against them, the current self-perception of white evangelicals fits with a long-term posture they have held toward the surrounding society. Gerardo Martí suggests that in the U.S., the evangelical community has "long found identity in religious defiance against the status quo, whether through rejection of the denominational structure of Mainline churches or the interminable agitation against the secular evils of society."¹⁹ While casting themselves as persecuted victims, Martí notes that "looking at their actions, evangelicals for the majority of American history have sided with the wealthy elites."²⁰ Following this dynamic, in recent years white evangelicals have turned to the wealthy elite figure of Donald Trump to serve as a kingly figure who champions their cause, so long as they provide reliable support.

4 Trump as Kingly Defender

First as a candidate and currently as president, Donald Trump has presented himself as a protector of Christians both in the U.S. and abroad. During the 2016 campaign, candidate Trump often called on Christians "to quit being the 'silent' majority and stand up for their beliefs."²¹ When asked how evangelicals could continue to give their support when allegations of his adulterous relationship with a pornographic actress became public, Tony Perkins told *Politico* that Christians "were tired of being kicked around by Barack Obama and his leftists. And I think they are finally glad that there's somebody on the playground that is willing to punch the bully."²² Regarding Christians overseas, Trump "is also outspoken on the need to defend Christians in Muslim countries, and other countries where they are being

persecuted.”²³ In one of the Republican debates, Trump spoke as a defender of Christians abroad, warning what he would do to the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and other Islamic terrorists:

You look at the Middle East, they’re chopping off heads, they’re chopping off the heads of Christians and anybody else that happens to be in the way, they’re drowning people in steel cages, and now we’re talking about waterboarding ... It’s fine, and if we want to go stronger, I’d go stronger too. Because frankly, that’s the way I feel. Can you imagine these people, these animals, over in the Middle East that chop off heads, sitting around talking and seeing that we’re having a hard problem with waterboarding? We should go for waterboarding and we should go tougher than waterboarding.²⁴

In speaking this way of concern for the plight of Christians overseas, and in his promises to promote the interests of evangelicals in the U.S., American evangelicals have connected him to the emperor Cyrus from the book of Ezra. Daniel Bock explains how this imperial moniker was originally bestowed upon Trump not by a Christian, but by the Israeli politician Benjamin Netanyahu:

Following the 45th president’s announcement earlier this year that the U.S. embassy in Israel would move from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, the Israeli Prime Minister remarked, “I want to tell you that the Jewish people have a long memory, so we remember the proclamation of the great king, Cyrus the Great, Persian king 2,500 years ago. He proclaimed that the Jewish exiles in Babylon could come back and rebuild our Temple in Jerusalem.”²⁵

By adopting this characterization to cast Trump in the role of Cyrus, evangelicals are able to look past Trump’s moral failings. Roger Olson explains why this group of the electorate who claim to be devout finds such a strong affinity with a president who does not attend church regularly, lies daily to the public and is a thrice-married adulterer:

[M]any evangelical Trump-supporters who call him “our Cyrus” *mean* that, even though he is not a Christian and his character is highly questionable, he is a pagan raised up by God to deliver and defend American Christians and “Christian America” from the secular and even anti-Christian political “left” that is determined to criminalize true, real, authentic Christianity (as they believe is already happening in some European countries and in Canada). Their hope and belief is that Trump will appoint federal judges and Supreme Court judges who will “undo” *Roe v Wade* and gay marriage and free Christians (and others) to refuse to do business with gays.²⁶

Viewing Trump in this role has proven politically advantageous, according to Rebecca Barrett-Fox, who contends that, “Trump-as-Cyrus has given the religious right the authority to assert dominion over American culture and politics.”²⁷ Going into the future, this approach could be “a deal that may only further encourage candidates of dubious morality to ally with religious right voters,”²⁸ offering a way for the white evangelical voting bloc to continue to speak on certain moral issues, such as abortion, without requiring upstanding morality of its political champions.

Stephen Strang, a prominent publisher within the Charismatic branch of American evangelicalism, serves as an example of an evangelical leader who embraces this identification of Trump as Cyrus, as he has promoted this view in three books over the past few years.²⁹ In his first book on Trump, *God and Donald Trump*, Strang shares that in the

2016 campaign, he originally “publicly endorsed Ted Cruz and supported him until the day he dropped out,” as Cruz was a known conservative Christian.³⁰ After Cruz’s departure from the race, Strang found his justification for supporting Trump:

By then I had become aware of the comparisons between Donald Trump and the Persian king Cyrus the Great, a pagan who was used by God to let the Israelites return from captivity to Jerusalem.... In my case, I reasoned that if God could use King Cyrus to accomplish His purposes, He could certainly use Donald Trump. Of course, I also supported him because of his stated support for Christian issues, which was the opposite of what his opponent said and believed.³¹

Continuing with this line of thought, Strang’s most recent book, *God, Trump, and the 2020 Election*, argues that Trump’s presidency, in line with the person of Cyrus and other biblical leaders, is foretold in the Bible.³²

The role of President Trump as the champion of evangelicals has also crossed over to missionary support. Rev. Andrew Brunson is an American missionary with the Evangelical Presbyterian Church denomination who had lived in Turkey for two decades prior to being imprisoned there for two years. The Turkish government charged him as a spy supporting a militant Islamic group in its attempt to overthrow the state. As a news article from *TIME* magazine relays, Trump’s economic pressure on Turkey helped secure Brunson’s release and return to the U.S.:

He was discharged not because the “Turkish justice system” deemed him innocent but rather because the Turks were afraid that Trump would unleash another series of tweets that could undermine the Turkish lira and contribute to an already galloping inflation. Turkey is at the beginning of a deep recession that risks undermining the very foundations of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s economic edifice and possibly his electoral coalition.³³

This instance of using the economic power of his position to secure the release of an American citizen falls in line with the work of the American presidency. In this case, however, Trump acted as the protector of an evangelical Christian missionary, embodying that mode of Cyrus as the imperial protector.

5 Trump’s Views of Evangelicals

The above examples convey how white evangelicals have used the Cyrus moniker to justify their support for Trump, whom they view as advocating on their behalf. The question arises whether Trump reciprocates that loyalty to this voting bloc. While there are no public examples of Trump having disparaged this demographic, journalist Jane Mayer reports in *The New Yorker* magazine that Trump has mocked an evangelical public figure, his own vice president, Mike Pence. Mayer writes, “A staff member from Trump’s campaign recalls him mocking Pence’s religiosity.”³⁴ The staffer described the ways that Trump supposedly teases his running mate:

He said that, when people met with Trump after stopping by Pence’s office, Trump would ask them, “Did Mike make you pray?” Two sources also recalled Trump needling Pence about his views on abortion and homosexuality. During a meeting with a legal scholar, Trump belittled Pence’s determination to overturn *Roe v. Wade*. The legal scholar had said that, if the Supreme Court did so, many states would likely legalize abortion on their own.

“You see?” Trump asked Pence. “You’ve wasted all this time and energy on it, and it’s not going to end abortion anyway.” When the conversation turned to gay rights, Trump motioned toward Pence and joked, “Don’t ask that guy—he wants to hang them all!”³⁵

This mocking of an evangelical subordinate has not been limited to Pence, as related by the veteran journalist Bob Woodward, whose investigative work on Watergate led to the end of Richard Nixon’s presidency.³⁶ Woodward reports that Trump expressed his displeasure with his first Attorney General, Jeff Sessions, whom Trump referred to as a “traitor,” even though Sessions had been the first senator to endorse Trump’s candidacy.³⁷ According to Woodward, Trump said that Sessions “is mentally retarded. He’s this dumb Southerner,” which is a cultural slur against Christians from the Bible Belt of the American South.³⁸ These examples regarding his treatment of and disregard for his subordinates, evangelical political leaders who made his presidency possible, indicate that Trump may not hold his evangelical voting base with the same high regard which they bestow on him.

6 Fear and Resentment

As quoted above, Bob Woodward entitled his account of the Trump presidency as *Fear: Trump in the White House*. This title captures a key theme of fear as holding Trump’s political subordinates and the Republican party as a whole in line with his agenda. Beyond Woodward’s book, however, the theme of fear helped ensure the President’s victory, as the fear caused by the bleak reality many Americans experienced in the first part of this current century drove them to support Trump. The challenging economic context fostered a resentment among both working-class whites and poor whites that fueled his rise.

Should he win the presidency, Trump promised economic renewal to those suffering from the loss of manufacturing and the breakdown of community stability in the Rust Belt of the Midwestern Great Lakes, the former powerhouse of the industrial era. This appeal was also given to rural areas, which included the region of Appalachia, which is known for providing the fuel for the furnaces of manufacturing through the coal industry.³⁹ In one of his presidential debates against Hillary Clinton, Trump charged that his opponent’s husband signing of the North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) resulted in “the worst trade deal the U.S. has ever signed, and has and continues to kill American jobs.”⁴⁰ As he lost the popular vote while relying on the Electoral College to win, Trump appealed to the poor working class of Appalachia, those who had suffered economically from the loss of manufacturing in the Rust Belt region, as well as farmers throughout the Midwest.

As a candidate, Trump’s promises to restore disenfranchised whites who felt economically displaced by globalization required the casting of Hispanics—both those who benefited from NAFTA and those who crossed the border looking for work—as the ones who took whites’ jobs away and threatened their safety. Such a negative characterization of Hispanic immigrants might seem to be counter-Christian in character. However, as demonstrated above, his presidential victory required the support of white evangelicals. Assessing the situation from the more liberal side of the political spectrum, the website of the progressive evangelical magazine *Sojourners* makes the charge that Trump, when needing a boost in approval ratings or popular assurance, returns to this voting base with racist rhetoric:

While many white evangelicals want to deny that racism was a motivating factor in their decision to vote for Trump, this administration understands how much its claim to legitimacy depends on the values cultivated by 40 years of “culture wars” that framed traditional white

values as “biblical” while branding progressive proposals for systemic change as “secular” and “anti-Christian.”⁴¹

That Trump speaks in a language that resonates with white Christians presents the irony that they, statistically, are not strong churchgoers. Timothy Carney suggests that Trump appeals to those who are not only disenfranchised economically but disenchanting with the church while considering themselves Christian:

Economic collapse goes hand in hand with the desiccation of religious institutions. When factories or coal mines close, some portion of the population flees. Still others stop going to church—white Americans are less likely to attend religious services when they are unemployed, sociologist Brad Wilcox reported in a study titled “No Money, No Honey, No Church.” A church built for a few hundred families has trouble maintaining itself when a third of them leave.⁴²

This transformation of Christian identity from active participation in weekly worship to a white cultural notion helps to explain why white evangelical loyalty to Trump remains high, even after several scandals, ongoing Department of Justice and congressional investigations, high turnover rates of cabinet-level staff within his administration, and an overall rancorous tone towards the rest of the government and much of the media. Among such a milieu, Pew Research reports, “More than two years into Donald Trump’s presidency, white evangelical Protestants in the United States continue to overwhelmingly support him.”⁴³ This support does not necessarily embody historic evangelicalism, as the findings of the Baylor Religion Survey from Baylor University in Texas identify this current cooptation of religious identity by political concerns as a “collection of values and attitudes form the core ethos of what we might call Trumpism.”⁴⁴ The movement “is a new form of nationalism which merges pro-Christian rhetoric with anti-Islam, anti-feminist, anti-globalist, and anti-government attitudes.”⁴⁵ This distortion of values leads historian Thomas Kidd of Baylor University to consider that, “White evangelicals’ uncritical fealty to the GOP is real, and that fealty has done so much damage to the movement that it is uncertain whether the term *evangelical* can be rescued from its political and racial connotations.”⁴⁶

In an attempt to regain the core of historic evangelical values, *Christianity Today*, the magazine founded by Billy Graham, published an editorial calling for the removal of Trump either through the December 2019 impeachment by the House of Representatives, or via the election of 2020.⁴⁷ Conservative evangelicals pushed back with responses such as Peter Leithart’s warning that Trump’s removal, “If successful, it will be a partisan success, and will embolden Democrats to pursue their agenda more aggressively.”⁴⁸ Leithart reminds his audience of what that progressive agenda supposedly entails:

The Democratic party provides a nurturing home for moral and social progressivism; it’s the party of abortion rights, of gay marriage, of a moral libertarianism that scorns the moral traditionalism of a significant sector of the American public. Christians shouldn’t think tossing Trump’s enemies an impeachment bone will satisfy them for long. Factions in this party regard orthodoxy as hate speech, and Trump does run interference for the orthodox. There are times when you have to oppose something just because you shouldn’t give the satisfaction of victory to its supporters. This is one of those times.⁴⁹

Leithart’s warning against removing Trump represents one aspect of fear for conservative Christians—that social progressives will take away their religious liberties.

Leithart's fear of what evangelicals would face without Trump continues the assumptions that go back to the support he received during his candidacy. Religious news journalist Angela Denker explains that, during the time that some evangelical leaders spoke out against Trump's character," the "people in the pews were frustrated and impatient."⁵⁰ For white evangelicals, Trump's candidacy represented a return to the values by their American version of Christianity:

Weaned by these same leaders on the easy theological selling points of American exceptionalism, support of the military, and nationalism, the less-popular tenets of Jesus' mandates to care for the poor and let the oppressed go free were a tougher sell than the seemingly obvious: Hillary wants to kill babies, and Trump has promised to save the unborn while also making us great again. The choice was clear.⁵¹

Popular author and radio talk show host Eric Metaxas agreed with the opinion of these laypeople both during the 2016 campaign against Trump's opponent Hillary Clinton, and has continued to support Trump during his presidency out of a fear for the alternative. To paint a picture of what would have happened had Trump lost, Metaxas compares those "Christians who think the Church in America might have survived a Hillary Clinton presidency" as parallel to "the devout Christian Germans who seriously and prayerfully thought it unChristian to be involved in opposing Hitler because to do so would have dirtied their hands with politics."⁵² Clinton's victory would have, according to Metaxas, continued the growth of a secular state that forces contrary values on its religious citizens:

To use American's taxes to pay for the murder of those yet unborn, or the teaching of unbiblical views of gender and sex to innocent children in our public schools is effectively to have allowed a secular religion (religion being defined by a certain set of views toward the ultimate questions, such as the definitions of what constitutes a human being and what constitutes marriage) become established. This is itself a kind of tyranny or fascism imposed by cultural elites. It is unconstitutional and unAmerican and our forebears took up arms and risked their lives to fight against such things.⁵³

In making his justification for supporting Trump, Metaxas plays on the fear of what might have, or as he argues, surely would have, happened had the election gone the other way. As resentment coupled with the fear of others helped Trump secure his office, so too fear of what the other dominant political party will do to religious conservatives serves to retain white evangelical support for Trump.

7 Democracy over Monarchy

From its inception, fear of what might happen helped shape the United States' governmental structure. Out of concern of what one person or a small body of people might do, American society has had built into it an anti-monarchical structure. This disposition against royalty emerged from the events of British colonists coming to the North American continent for religious freedom in the seventeenth century. Because of the pursuit of religious liberty, according to Steven Waldman, in the following century, "Religion helped cause and sustain the American Revolution. The efforts to break from the Crown became inextricably tied to the drive to undermine the Church of England, and vice versa."⁵⁴ After successfully gaining independence from the British Empire, the fledgling country abolished royal titles and opted against having a king as ruler. Had he chosen to, General George Washington, commander of the Continental Army, could very well have claimed a throne as king over a new nation in the

wake of the 1783 victory against the British.⁵⁵ Instead, he surrendered his charge and returned home following the war.

A few years later, the infant government forged the Constitution of the United States. This governing document set up a government of three branches, which are the Executive,—the President and the administration—, the Congress, comprised of the House of Representatives and the Senate, and the Judicial branch.⁵⁶ In 1863, Abraham Lincoln would describe this construction as a “government of the people, by the people, for the people.”⁵⁷ In a simplistic description of order, Congress represents the public by passing laws, the Executive or presidency implements the laws, and the Courts adjudicate the laws, determining whether they comply with or violate the Constitution. As such, the United States was founded as a representative republic, with a system of checks-and-balances so that no one branch, particularly the Executive, would accrue too much power. General Washington came out of retirement and was elected as the first president. He set an example of limiting power for future presidents by limiting himself to two four year terms in office. This precedent was followed until broken for the first time by the four-term presidency of Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s time in office from 1933-1945. Congress veered back to the original intent of limiting the power of the presidency by passing the Twenty-Second Amendment to the Constitution in 1947. This amendment, ratified by the States in 1951 to allow it to take effect, confined a president to two four-year terms of service.

In contrast to the Twenty-Second Amendment’s intents, recent decades have witnessed a tendency of the American presidency to assume more power, especially in the area of overseas conflict. The president serves as the Commander in Chief over the military, but Congress passed the War Powers Act in 1973. The purpose of this resolution was “to fulfill the intent of the framers of the Constitution of the United States” in requiring the “collective judgment of both the Congress and the President” for any “introduction of United States Armed Forces into hostilities.”⁵⁸ Limiting presidential use of force without congressional approval appeared necessary after the introduction of American troops to Vietnam in the 1960s. Political scholar and television pundit Rachel Maddow traces the history of the movement of the American military from a force as needed only when necessary to a standing military and industry in her book *Drift: The Unmooring of American Military Power*.⁵⁹ Maddow argues that the pushback against a president undertaking war at will following the Vietnam War “didn’t break anything. America’s structural disinclination toward war is not a sign that something’s gone wrong. It’s not a bug in the system. It *is* the system. It’s the way the founders set us up—to ensure our continuing national health.”⁶⁰ While presidents since Reagan might get frustrated, and their supporters call for patriotism by not impeding those actions, she explains how, “Every Congress is meddling, disinclined toward war, and obstructive of a president’s desire for it—on purpose.”⁶¹ Regarding the investigation of the Reagan administration’s dealings in Nicaragua in the 1980s, “Congress was doing its constitutional duty, and what the founders expected.”⁶² But she says that since the time of Reagan, this branch of the U.S. government has fallen short in the responsibility to limit presidential power in going to war:

Congress has never since effectively asserted itself to stop a president with a bead on war. It was true of George Herbert Walker Bush. It was true of Bill Clinton. And by September 11, 2001, even if there had been real resistance to Vice President Cheney and President George W. Bush starting the next war (or two), there were no institutional barriers strong enough to have realistically stopped them. By 9/11, the war making authority in the United States had

become, for all intents and purposes, uncontested and unilateral: one man's decision to make.⁶³

As the unilateral exercise of power has grown within the presidency, it is notable that Trump has displayed a public affinity for authoritarian rulers. This fondness for, and even envy of, figures such as Kim Jong Un of North Korea has raised the concern that Trump would like to follow his Russian and Chinese counterparts to get rid of term limits:

One difference between Putin and Xi in their maneuverings and that of Trump is that the Russian and Chinese presidents have found success ... Comedian and political commentator Bill Maher warned voters days before the 2016 presidential election, "Once fascists get power, they don't give it up. You've got President Trump for life."⁶⁴

Since his election, Trump regularly jokes about staying in power longer than the Constitution allows. Christian right leader Jerry Falwell, Jr., the current president and son of the founder of Liberty University, Jerry Falwell, who above was shown to get evangelicals to back Reagan for president in 1980, suggested publicly that Trump should enjoy an extra two years to his term to make up for federal investigation into his election.⁶⁵ The encouragement from an evangelical leader, even as an attempt at humor, to abandon the American Constitution and the rule of law is surprising in that constitutional term limits enshrine the casting off of lifelong monarchical rule, which was fundamental to the founding of the American republic.

8 The Effect on Missions

For a religious demographic that should be concerned with conversion and cross-cultural mission work, the question arises of how white American evangelicals' giving their allegiance to Trump affects their witness to the gospel, and their support for or work in global missions. One illustrative example of the current relationship between Trump and missions is seen in the case of Andrew Brunson, as recounted above. Brunson's case came back into public view a year after Trump secured his release when the president opened the door for Turkey's military to enter northern Syria, effectively allowing the Turkish army to attack America's Kurdish allies. The outcry of Americans, including evangelicals, regarding the fate of the Kurds—including some Kurdish Christians—prompted Trump to warn Turkey's President Erdoğan against committing genocide in a letter:

Let's work out a good deal! You don't want to be responsible for slaughtering thousands of people, and I don't want to be responsible for destroying the Turkish economy—and I will. I've already given you a little sample with respect to Pastor Brunson ...⁶⁶

For Brunson, the Presbyterian missionary was now used as a financial lever to coerce Turkey against particular military actions. The former missionary, however, views an outcome of his ordeal in prison as having many Western Christians now praying for the nation of Turkey and its fledgling church.⁶⁷ In this way of raising awareness, it could be overseas and cross-cultural missionaries who, even if tied into the financial and military interests of the U.S. to some degree, advocate in their own country and with their American supporting churches for a better posture toward and treatment of persons from Muslim-majority and Spanish-speaking countries.

9 Conclusion

Trump's image and actions as a protector and defender of evangelical Christianity have cast him as a Cyrus figure, the pagan king who enables the Jewish people to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple with the hope to flourish once again. In Donald Trump, therefore, white evangelicals see a defender of the faith who fights on their behalf, while simultaneously restoring the fortunes of the economy by removing government oversight of business, and entering tariff battles with trading partners overseas. Part of the plan for flourishing, however, closes the borders to immigrants and refugees, who could either steal jobs, bring harm, and help accelerate the white majority into a minority of the overall population. The appeal for white American evangelicals, then, is a return to an idealized era of dominance, both in terms of ethnicity and religion. This prioritization of economic and geographic security, however, displaces the evangelical values of personal conversion and missionary activism. In a desire to preserve the new priorities, in Trump, white evangelicals find a kingly figure who wages battle on their behalf, and so look to him as the one to keep them safe, fill their pockets, and retain their religious liberty. The result of offering their unquestionable allegiance might very well be opposite to the religious liberties and economic prosperity that they look to Trump to protect and preserve.

Notes

¹David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to 1980s* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 2-3.

²Ibid.

³Frances Fitzgerald, *The Evangelicals: The Struggle to Shape America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017), 2.

⁴"In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace: An Update on America's Changing Religious Landscape," *Pew Research Center*, October 17, 2019.

<https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/> (accessed 1 January 2020).

⁵The Pew study notes, "However, looking only at white Protestants—rather than at the public as a whole—the *share of white Protestants* who describe themselves as born-again or evangelical Christians is at least as high as it was a decade ago." Ibid.

⁶"Racial and Ethnic Composition," *Pew Research Center*. <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/racial-and-ethnic-composition/> (accessed 1 January 2020).

⁷Thomas S. Kidd, *Who Is an Evangelical?: The History of a Movement in Crisis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 75.

⁸Ibid.

⁹For the history of the rise of the Moral Majority's support for Reagan, see Fitzgerald, *The Evangelicals*, 312-318. Regarding ongoing evangelical support for Republican candidates, see Robert P. Jones, *The End of White Christian America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016), 90-105.

¹⁰John Fea, *Believe Me: The Evangelical Road to Donald Trump* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2018), 5-6. See also Fitzgerald, *The Evangelicals*, 636.

¹¹Fea, *Believe Me*, 6.

¹²Pickett's Charge conveys an ultimate futility in that the event took place on 3 July 1863, the final day of the Battle of Gettysburg of the American Civil War (1861-1865). Though the Confederate Army from the South made an assault with twice the number of troops, their high casualties in the charge, and failure to win the battle, marked the last incursion by the Southern army into the North before the later defeat of the Confederacy.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Jonathan Vespa, David M. Armstrong, and Lauren Medina, "Demographic Turning Points for the United States: Population Projections for 2020 to 2060," *United States Census Bureau*, March 2018.

<https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/2018/demo/P25-1144.pdf>, 7 (accessed 11 January 2020).

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Robert P. Jones, “White Christian America Ended in the 2010s,” *NBC News*, nbcnews.com, 27 December 2019. <https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/2010s-spelled-end-white-christian-american-1106936> (accessed 11 January 2020).

¹⁷Fea, *Believe Me*, 180.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Gerardo Martí, *American Blindspot: Race, Class, Religion, and the Trump Presidency* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 9-10.

²⁰Ibid, 10.

²¹Phyllis Schlafly, Ed Martin, and Brett M. Decker, *The Conservative Case for Trump* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 2016), 93.

²²Zack Stanton, “Tony Perkins: Trump Gets ‘a Mulligan’ on Life, Stormy Daniels,” *Politico Magazine*, 23 January 2018. <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2018/01/23/tony-perkins-evangelicals-donald-trump-stormy-daniels-216498> (accessed 12 February 2018).

²³Schlafly, *The Conservative Case for Trump*, 93.

²⁴Tessa Berenson, “Donald Trump Defends Torture at Republican Debate,” *TIME*, 4 March 2016. <http://time.com/4247397/donald-trump-waterboarding-torture/> (accessed 12 February 2018).

²⁵Daniel Bock, “Is Trump Our Cyrus? The Old Testament Case for Yes and No,” *Christianity Today*, 29 October 2018. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2018/october-web-only/donald-trump-cyrus-prophecy-old-testament.html> (accessed 2 November 2018).

²⁶Roger Olson, “Is Trump ‘Our Cyrus?’ A Critical American-Christian Explanation and Response,” *Roger E. Olson*, 27 August 2018. <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogerolson/2018/08/is-trump-our-cyrus-a-critical-american-christian-explanation-and-response/> (accessed 2 November 2018). See also Brunson’s interactions with Trump described in Andrew Brunson, with Craig Borlase, *God’s Hostage: A True Story of Persecution, Imprisonment, and Perseverance* (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing, 2019), 231, 239-241.

²⁷Rebecca Barrett-Fox, “A King Cyrus President: How Donald Trump’s Presidency Reasserts Conservative Christians’ Right to Hegemony,” *Humanity & Society* 42/4 (2018), 516.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹See Stephen E. Strang, *God and Donald Trump* (Lake Mary: Charisma House Book Group, 2017), 72-73, *Trump Aftershock: The President’s Seismic Impact on Culture and Faith in America* (Lake Mary: Charisma House Book Group, 2018), 58, 199-200, and *God, Trump, and the 2020 Election: Why He Must Win and What’s at Stake for Christians if He Loses* (Lake Mary: Charisma House Book Group, 2020), 137-138.

³⁰Strang, *Trump Aftershock*, 58.

³¹Strang also reports that “it wasn’t just Charismatic prophets who made the Cyrus-Trump comparison. Temple organizations issued a ‘temple coin’ in early 2018 with Trump’s profile, and right behind him there’s a rendering of King Cyrus. Most of the writing is in Hebrew, but it also says in English: ‘Cyrus-Balfour-Trump Declaration 2018.’ ” Ibid., 58. See also 199.

³²Strang, *God, Trump, and the 2020 Election*, 135-139.

³³Henri Barkey, “Why the Trump Administration and Turkey Don’t Win in Pastor Andrew Brunson’s Release,” *TIME*, 12 October 2019. <https://time.com/5423893/andrew-brunson-turkey-trump/> (accessed 6 July 2019).

³⁴Jane Mayer, “The Danger of President Pence,” *The New Yorker*, newyorker.com, 16 October 2017. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/10/23/the-danger-of-president-pence> (accessed 11 February 2020).

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Bob Woodward, *Fear: Trump in the White House* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018), 216.

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Ibid.

³⁹Both leading up and in response to Trump’s presidential victory, J.D. Vance’s *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis* provided first person insight and reflection to explain the cultural mood and context of Trump’s support among the dispossessed of Appalachia. See J.D.

Vance, *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2016).

⁴⁰Stephen Gandell, “Donald Trump Says NAFTA Was the Worst Trade Deal the U.S. Ever Signed,” *Fortune*, 27 September 2016. <http://fortune.com/2016/09/27/presidential-debate-nafta-agreement/> (accessed 12 February 2018).

⁴¹Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, “Trump Turns to Christian Nationalists When He Feels Vulnerable,” *Sojourners*, 29 January 2019. <https://sojo.net/articles/trump-turns-christian-nationalists-when-he-feels-vulnerable> (accessed 29 January 2019).

⁴²Timothy P. Carney, “Why Ex-churchgoers Flock to Trump,” *Philanthropy Daily*, 23 January 2019. <https://www.philanthropydaily.com/why-ex-churchgoers-flocked-to-trump/> (accessed 29 January 2019). I have encountered this in the past couple years with people who show no commitment to a local church or Christian lifestyle, but see Trump as a champion of Christianity.

⁴³Philip Schwadel and Gregory A. Smith, “Evangelical Approval of Trump Remains High, but Other Religious Groups Are Less Supportive,” *Pew Research Center*, 28 March 28 2019. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/03/18/evangelical-approval-of-trump-remains-high-but-other-religious-groups-are-less-supportive/> (accessed 5 January 2020).

⁴⁴Paul Froese, Jeremy Uecker, and Kenneth Vaughan, “Core Values,” *Baylor Religion Survey, American Values, Mental Health, and Using Technology in the Age of Trump: Findings from the Baylor Religion Survey, Wave 5* (Waco: Baylor University, 2017). <https://www.baylor.edu/baylorreligionsurvey/doc.php/292546.pdf> (accessed 20 December 2019).

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶Kidd, *Who Is an Evangelical?*, 154.

⁴⁷Mark Galli, “Trump Should Be Removed from Office,” *Christianity Today*, 19 December 2019. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2019/december-web-only/trump-should-be-removed-from-office.html> (accessed 20 December 2019).

⁴⁸Peter J. Leithart, “The Case for Keeping Trump,” *First Things*. <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2019/12/the-case-for-keeping-trump> (accessed 21 December 2019).

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰Angela Denker, *Red State Christians: Understanding the Voters Who Elected Donald Trump* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2019), 45.

⁵¹Ibid.

⁵²Jon Ward, “My Email Exchange with Eric Metaxas,” *Medium.com*, 23 February 2018. <https://medium.com/jon-ward/my-email-exchange-with-eric-metaxas-2ac92474abab> (accessed 9 February 2020).

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴Steven Waldman, *Founding Faith: Providence, Politics, and the Birth of a Religious Freedom in America* (New York: Random House, 2008), xii.

⁵⁵Joseph J. Ellis, *His Excellency: George Washington* (New York: Vintage Books, 2005), 138-142.

⁵⁶*The Constitution of the United States*.

⁵⁷Abraham Lincoln, *Gettysburg Address*, 1863.

⁵⁸U.S. Code Title 50. War and National Defense Chapter 33. War Powers Resolution, Section 1541. Purpose and Policy. <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/50/1541> (accessed 12 January 2020).

⁵⁹Rachel Maddow, *Drift: The Unmooring of American Military Power* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2012).

⁶⁰Maddow, *Drift*, 96.

⁶¹Ibid.

⁶²Ibid.

⁶³Ibid., 125.

⁶⁴Nick Romano, “Donald Trump: Bill Maher warns he could be president for life, blasts media,” *Entertainment Weekly*, 11 November 2016. <http://ew.com/article/2016/11/05/bill-maher-donald-trump-could-be-president-life-blasts-media/> (accessed 26 February 2018).

⁶⁵Natasha Bertrand and Darren Samuelsohn, “What if Trump Won’t Accept a 2020 Defeat?,” *Politico*, 21 June 2019. <https://www.politico.com/story/2019/06/21/trump-election-2020-1374589> (accessed 7 July 2019).

⁶⁶ “‘Don’t Be a Fool!’: Trump Threatened Turkish President in Letter,” *Politico.com*, 16 October 2019. <https://www.politico.com/news/2019/10/16/trump-erdogan-letter-turkey-048758> (accessed 17 January 2020).

⁶⁷ Brunson, *God’s Hostage*, 247.