The Evangelical Reckoning Over Donald Trump

White, conservative Christians voted for the Republican candidate by a huge margin, but this election revealed deep fractures among leaders and churches—especially along racial lines.

Andrew McGill

For months, the stories came in waves. The death of the religious right. The new moral minority. The Christian case for voting Trump, followed by the Christian case for not voting Trump. Everyone wanted to know what conservative evangelicals, who have long been considered a unified voting bloc, would do during this election.

Now, it is clear. They overwhelmingly supported Donald Trump.

The Republican candidate's victory may seem like an affirmation of the old, long-standing coalition between evangelicals and the Republican party, and in many ways, it is. But vote counts conceal deep, painful fractures among the huge, diverse group of Americans who identify as evangelical Christians. Nothing makes this clearer than the unprecedented in-fighting among Christian leaders in the lead-up to the election. Many people in big, important positions staked their credibility on supporting or opposing Donald Trump; old allies turned against one another, and new upstarts gained fame.

A rough map might look like something like this. Some leaders, like the Liberty University President Jerry Falwell Jr., came out vocally for Trump. Others—like Russell Moore, who leads the Southern Baptist Convention's political arm—came out vocally against him. Still others stayed out of it: Many pastors didn't affirmatively support Trump, according to the New York

City pastor Tim Keller, although they might have ended up voting for him on Election Day.

But for some evangelical leaders, and particularly women and people of color, this election was never about power jockeying or compromise. To them, Trump represents a bigoted, misogynistic worldview and an existential threat. More than all the nasty barbs exchanged the campaign and the months of divisive arguments, this is the greatest challenge evangelicals have to reckon with in the wake of the election. White, conservative Christians may have thought they were just casting a vote for president, but some of their brothers and sisters in the church see their choice as a direct and personal assault.

Now, the fall-out begins.

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Jerry Falwell Jr. is one of the winners of this election. The president of Liberty University aligned himself with Trump early on, following the footsteps of his father, Jerry Falwell, who founded the Moral Majority in 1979. Falwell Jr. stuck with Trump through Biblical misfires and comments about groping women. But most impressively, he remained staunchly pro-Trump despite withering criticism from people who might have otherwise been his allies. For example: Here's more Moore describing a Trump event featuring Falwell and other conservative Christian leaders:

> If you wondered why younger, theological, gospel-centered evangelicals reacted neg to the old guard Religious Right, well, now you know.
>
> — Russell Moore (@drmoore) 12:04 PM - 21 Jun 2016

Falwell rejects this view. "He's not speaking for anybody but himself," he told me in mid-October. "The rank-and-file evangelicals are strongly behind Trump, and Russell Moore is nothing but an employee of the Southern

Baptist Convention for their public policy whatever, liaison, whatever it is."

While Falwell told reporters on Tuesday night that "only the [evangelical] leadership was divided" on Trump. But in political terms, the leadership has typically mattered a lot. Partly because conservative Christians are seen as such an important voting bloc in the U.S., people who claim to represent them have significant power and influence. Moore, said Falwell, "doesn't speak for the church members or the evangelical public any more than Louis Farrakhan speaks for all Muslims or I speak for all evangelicals. It's just one person."

This is one of the big questions about Christianity in the Trump era: Who really speaks for the "evangelical worldview"?

For a long time, there was a set cast of characters who claimed to represent that voice in politics, and many of those men or their sons came out during this election as Trump supporters or advisers. Some of them are effectively historical artifacts: Ralph Reed, who led the Christian Coalition during the '90s, for example, has been a big Trump supporter and is often quoted in the press. But when I spoke with students at the evangelical Liberty University, many said they'd never heard of him.

Moore said these figures have presented inaccurate representations of evangelicals' views on Trump. "I don't make the distinction between evangelicals who aligned themselves with Trump versus evangelicals who didn't," he said. "I instead think the division is over motive and mode of operation." Most pastors were fundamentally skeptical of Trump, even if they ended up voting for him, Moore said, while "professional political activists within the evangelical community" were his main boosters.

Others from that old cast of religious-right characters are still influential, like Billy Graham's son, Franklin Graham, and they claim to represent a unified group of evangelicals. In an interview a few days before the election, Graham said he has plenty of affirmative reasons to support Trump, and those who try

to pit Christians against one another should not be trusted. “There are people that are wanting to divide the church, that are wanting to divide the evangelical voice,” he said.

Russell Moore “doesn’t speak for the church members or the evangelical public any more than Louis Farrakhan speaks for all Muslims.”

It’s getting harder to claim that there’s a unified “evangelical voice” in America, though. Roughly 81 percent of white evangelicals supported Trump, but many seem to have low or mixed opinions of him. The divides are also racial: Only 60 percent of all people who identify as Protestants voted Republican. The gap between that number and the number of white evangelicals who voted for Trump reflect the views of evangelicals of color, along with some theologically liberal or mainline Protestants.

The moral high ground of a unified “evangelical voice” have shifted, too. This election was not a race to the top on matters of personal integrity; as Al Mohler, the vocally anti-Trump president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, said during the campaign, if he were to support Trump, he would have to apologize to Bill Clinton, who he called out for sexual immorality in the ’90s.

“You’ve now hitched your wagon to the GOP and Mr. Trump in ways that just ruin moral credibility in the country,” said Thabiti Anyabwile, a theologically conservative Baptist pastor in D.C. “I don’t know how you recover from that.”

While people who are not evangelical have criticized Christians for supporting a candidate who has not lived according to their teachings, the more influential dissent has come from Christians themselves. Beth Moore, who teaches a Bible-study curriculum and who declined to be interview for this article, caused an uproar when she spoke out on Twitter against the male evangelical leaders who were waving off Trump’s statements about “groping” women:

> Try to absorb how acceptable the disesteem and objectifying of women has been when some Christian leaders don't think it's that big a deal.
>
> — Beth Moore (@BethMooreLPM) 7:22 AM - 9 Oct 2016

Other evangelical Christian women have felt the same kind of dissonance. “There are no words for what he said. And people would support that?” said Trillia Newbell, a conservative Christian author who has worked for the Southern Baptist Convention. “The fact that Beth Moore had to say something, and that’s what got the attention of our leaders, is telling. … It opened a wound. And there are people who are still mourning and weeping. So we have an opportunity to care for them.”

Some evangelical leaders who supported Trump dismissed the allegations of misogyny as a distraction. “To suggest that people who are voting for Trump are ratifying the worst of his behavior is simply not logical,” said Eric Metaxas, a radio-show host who has been a vocal supporter of Trump. “If people want to bludgeon you with, ‘Beth Moore said this and this,’ there’s no reaction except to say that anyone who has suffered [sexual abuse]—that’s one of the most serious things there is.”

On this and other issues, nearly everyone I spoke with emphasized a need for healing. As Newbell put it: “My heart is to care for the women have have been abused.” Metaxas said he got an email from a friend disavowing their relationship because he had supported Trump’s rise. “Fundamentally, as a Christian, we have to know that there is pain on the other side, and if I claim to be a Christian, I have to care about the pain on the other side,” Metaxas said.

Samuel Rodriguez, the head of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference, said he’s hoping to start a “unity movement” with Martin Luther Jr.’s daughter, Bernice King. “I want to tell Latinos there’s no reason to fear Donald Trump, at all,” he said. The president-elect allayed Rodriguez’s concerns about the wall in a conversation during the campaign, the pastor

said. “We’re not going to permit anything that will separate and deport God-fearing, God-loving, hard-working families, whether they’re undocumented or not—that’s not going to happen.”

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But a few predicted that this election could permanently damage attempts to create unity among evangelicals. “I spend most of my time in ministry talking and teaching about racial reconciliation,” said Jemar Tisby, the president of the Reformed African American Network, a “theologically traditional” coalition of black Christians and churches, as he described it. “The vast majority of white evangelicals with whom I interact are on board and want to see a more racially diversified and unified church. However, when that same constituency overwhelmingly supports Donald Trump, I feel like they haven’t understood any of my concerns as a racial minority and an African American.”

Anyabwile said it was disorienting to see so many of his fellow evangelicals seemingly overlook statements that were racist, misogynistic, and bigoted. During the campaign, many people argued that evangelical Christian Trump supporters weren’t really evangelicals; while they might identify that way, they aren’t really engaged in the church. “At 80 percent of evangelicals voting for Trump, I don’t think you can say ... that those people aren’t truly evangelicals, or that there’s two evangelicalisms,” said Anyabwile. “These are people in the church, in the pew with you.”

Some conservative churches and denominational organizations, including Moore and the Southern Baptist Convention, have been pushing for more conversations on race within the evangelical world. Now that Trump will be president of the United States, it’s unclear how the black Christians who fear Trump, like Tisby and Anyabwile, will reconcile with the white Christians who voted for him. When I spoke with him on Wednesday, Moore was a bit weary. “What I would have hoped to have seen this year, maybe even if people

didn’t vote any differently than they did,” he said, is that people would “take seriously as moral questions those issues of racial justice and reconciliation in this country.”

Anyabwile anticipates that it will be harder to get people to engage with his church, which is in a heavily black area of D.C., and harder to get his congregants to engage with evangelical culture more broadly. That could pose a huge demographic challenge for churches that are trying to engage with an increasingly racially diverse American population. “Evangelicals in this vote have created a pretty deadly and chilling effect on their witness to Christ and the gospel and the scriptures,” he said. “There’s not only a credibility problem in terms of the body politic. There’s also an evangelistic problem.”

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The evangelical leaders who supported Trump during the election do not see the future in such dire terms. “I suspect that in time they will see he is not the person they feared,” said Metaxas. “Because if he were that person, I myself would be the first to say, ‘I made a mistake. I made a terrible mistake.’ I have been hopeful that he would be fundamentally decent, and that most Americans would see that.”

Others say that Trump is a new man, that everything he’s said on the campaign trail—about women, Mexicans, Muslims, the “inner city,” and more—does not reflect who he truly is. “I’ve seen a lot of change in him in the last year or two. He’s a different man,” said Falwell Jr. “I believe everybody is redeemable, and I think Donald Trump has been positively influenced by the American public that he’s interacted with over the past year.”

After months and months of pushing back against Trump, Moore said he hopes he’s proven wrong about the president-elect. “My prayer is that Jerry Falwell Jr.’s view of Donald Trump turns out to be the right view,” he said.

“My prayer is that four years from now, my attitude is to say that Jerry Falwell Jr. knew depths of this leader’s spirituality and character that I didn’t know.”

He’ll also be praying for Trump, he said, just like the Bible commands.