

Evangelical reckonings

Randall Balmer, David Gushee, and Tim Alberta diagnose what's gone wrong.

by [Amar D. Peterman](#) in the [December 2024](#) issue

Published on November 26, 2024

In Review

Randall Balmer



How American Christianity Can
Reclaim Its Prophetic Voice

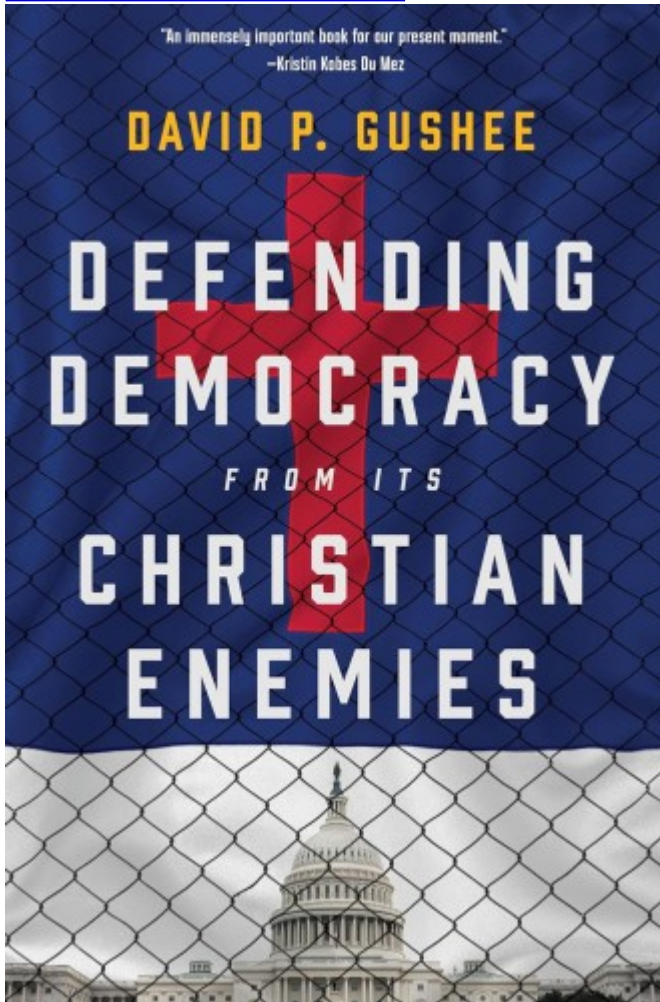
Saving Faith

How American Christianity Can Reclaim Its Prophetic Voice

By Randall Balmer

Fortress

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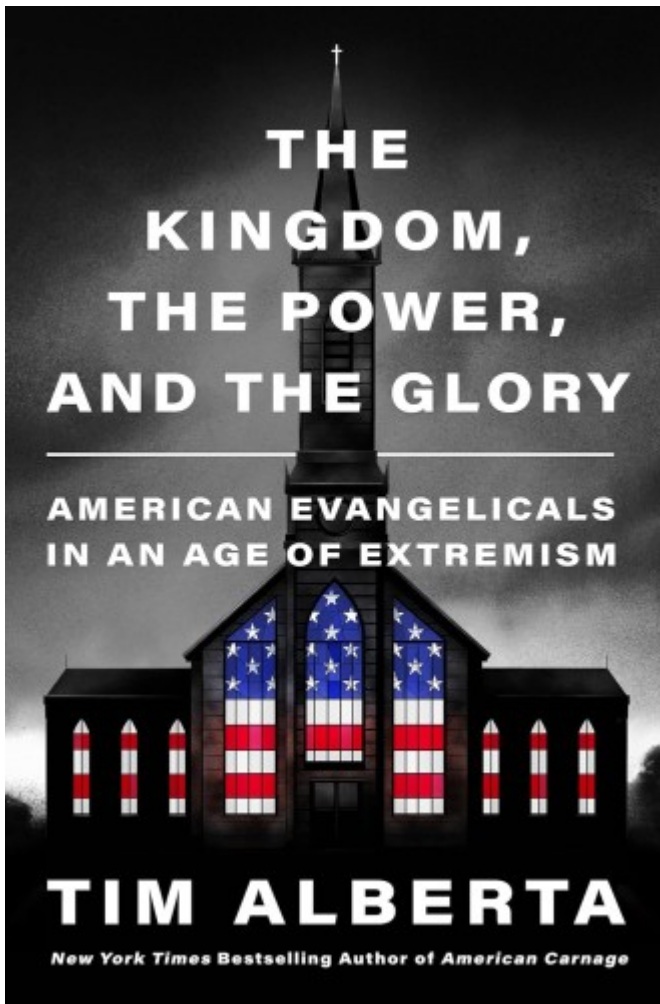


Defending Democracy from Its Christian Enemies

By David P. Gushee

Eerdmans

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The Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory

American Evangelicals in an Age of Extremism

By Tim Alberta

Harper

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What more can we say about evangelicalism? This is the perennial question for religious scholars of the past decade. While the answer may very well be “not much,” evangelicals continue to give historians, scholars, and public commentators ample source material for the next book.

Indeed, an incredible number of commentaries, histories, and analyses of American evangelicalism were released in 2023. This shelf includes heartfelt memoirs such as

Beth Moore's *All My Knotted-Up Life*, sociological examinations of Christian nationalism such as Andrew Whitehead's *American Idolatry*, counter-histories of the evangelical story such as Isaac Sharp's *The Other Evangelicals*, and inspired imaginings of what evangelicalism might be, such as Karen Swallow Prior's *The Evangelical Imagination* and Russell Moore's *Losing Our Religion*.

The vast majority of texts written about American evangelicalism in the past year came from White male scholars located in and around the evangelical tradition. When women do bring their voices to the conversation, it is often out of a position of disenfranchisement or outright abuse from their evangelical community. (It is no surprise that women writing about evangelicalism are often the ones who offer a more fruitful and robust vision of the tradition.)

Three notable examples of the trend of White, male evangelicals critiquing the movement are worth a closer look: Randall Balmer's *Saving Faith*, David Gushee's *Defending Democracy from Its Christian Enemies*, and Tim Alberta's *The Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory*. All three of these scholars are highly respected in their field and have previously published books addressing the fusion of American evangelicalism with social and political conservatism. Each of these authors inhabits a unique space—Balmer is an Ivy League historian, Gushee is a respected ethicist associated with many recent books critiquing the evangelical movement, and Alberta is an award-winning journalist.

Moreover, each author takes a distinct approach to American evangelicalism that complements the others. Balmer's history sets a broader context for the evangelical movement, Gushee offers theory and language to help make sense of evangelical motivation and action, and Alberta gives an in-depth look at the consequences of such history and motivation in American evangelicalism today. If my treatment of each book were proportionate to its length, Balmer's text (104 pages) would merit only a handful of sentences while Alberta (452 pages) would take up nearly every word, minus a few paragraphs for Gushee (235 pages). Therefore, to hold these three texts together, it is best to turn to the questions that each text speaks to. Each author writes in response to a problem he sees in the evangelical tradition and offers his take on a generative solution.

In *Saving Faith*, Balmer argues that to halt the "decline of Christianity" in American life, evangelicals must reckon with their history and "reclaim [their] prophetic voice." However, the book offers such a selective history that it fails to function well

as a commentary on American evangelicalism or a survey of evangelical history. Balmer talks about many different people and moments without engaging with them substantively. He spends the first chapter, for instance, categorizing Christianity into three main groups: mainline Protestants, evangelicals, and Roman Catholics. However, his treatment of the mainline only serves to set up his argument against ecumenism, his eight-page overview of evangelicalism omits the common characters found in evangelical historiography and instead centers on Ronald Reagan to argue that evangelicalism was apolitical until the 1970s, and his three-page treatment of Roman Catholicism focuses almost exclusively on clergy and pedophilia. *Saving Faith* feels more like the afternoon musings of a seasoned historian leaning on his knowledge than a deeply researched and innovative book.

Gushee's aim in *Defending Democracy from Its Christian Enemies* is to utilize the teachings and practices of the Christian tradition to defend liberal democracy against what he calls "authoritarian reactionary Christianity." A broader category than Christian nationalism, ARC is rooted in a "visceral and reactive discomfort" to social change and a "perceived inability" to defend or protect Christians from it. The strategies of ARC, Gushee argues, involve pushing democracy to its limits through authoritarian practices and ideology.

Situated in the world of Christian ethics, Gushee's project begins with an interrogation and examination of terms such as "democracy" and "the common good." After proposing a paradigm of secular revolution and religious counterrevolution based on the work of political theorist Michael Walzer, Gushee engages Walzer's theory with ARC. He brings the two into dialogue through a historical study of France and Germany, then contemporary examinations of Russia, Poland, Hungary, and Brazil, before returning to the United States. Despite the authoritarian tendencies Gushee sees in the Christian tradition, the book ends with a constructive conclusion that looks to the Baptist tradition and the Black church as alternative examples of constructive political engagement.

Alberta's tome is an extended exploration of evangelicalism today. What makes *The Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory* significant is not only Alberta's journalistic excellence but the access he gains from his status as an insider to the tradition and his identity as a White man. He draws out extended, often surprising, commentary from key evangelical leaders who might otherwise be guarded and suspicious of such conversations. In one chapter we encounter Robert Jeffress expressing remorse, in another Greg Locke admits that his social media strategy is to capitalize

on outrage, and in another we join Alberta at a roadside diner with Russell Moore, David French, and Daniel Darling. Throughout the book, Alberta demonstrates that when it comes to “the kingdom, the power, and the glory,” White evangelicals are quick to exchange the first for the latter two.

However, for all the good that Alberta accomplishes in *The Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory*, one of the greatest strengths of the book is also one of its most glaring weaknesses: Alberta, too, is a White evangelical man, and the corrective vision he offers does not go far enough to include those on the margins of American evangelicalism. This leads to an important question for each of these texts: Who is missing?

It is not surprising that women are at the top of the list. Alberta’s treatment of women (or lack thereof) is most notable. Only 30 pages of his book highlight women in American evangelicalism, either as leaders of the movement or as dissenting voices. At the close of one chapter, Alberta recounts a conversation with Jules Woodson and Tiffany Thigpen, both survivors of sexual assault in Southern Baptist churches, and intersperses his commentary. The following chapter focuses on two additional figures: Rachael Denhollander and Julie Roys. Alberta’s telling of Denhollander’s story is powerful and moving, while his treatment of Roys feels secondary at best, as though he were scrambling to include another voice.

As I see it, Alberta’s inclusion of Roys signals a larger problem with *The Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory*: women are only included insofar as they challenge the patriarchal practices and abusive normativity in American evangelicalism. Roys’s entire platform is built on reactionism. This is perhaps most evident in her reporting on the Moody Bible Institute, which Alberta uplifts as an exemplar of journalism on abuse in Christian institutions. Yet it was Roys who singled out people of color as being the heretics among the faculty and perpetuated misleading allegations and highly selective narratives about a former MBI president.

Rather than foregrounding Roys, Alberta could have placed Denhollander’s powerful story alongside that of Karen Swallow Prior, Kaitlyn Schiess, Beth Moore, Taylor Schumann, Stephanie Summers, Shirley Hoogstra, Tish Harrison Warren, Nikki Toyama-Szeto, Nona Jones, or Jennifer Powell McNutt. If Alberta wanted to focus on MBI as a critique of evangelical institutions, he could have better served this chapter by highlighting Janay Garrick, who is in the middle of a long legal battle with the institution after her termination for refusing to affirm that only men can be pastors,

or the survivors of abuse at Moody who have been vocal over the past several years about the way the institution has protected its predominantly White male leadership at the cost of both women and queer students there, or the faculty of color who in many cases lost their jobs due to the very witch hunt that Roys perpetuated.

Balmer too, for all his historical excursions, never highlights the constructive role of women in the Christian tradition. Indeed, if the goal is to reclaim Christianity's prophetic voice, women may well be the first place we ought to turn. In his chapter on worthy examples Christians ought to follow, Balmer is quick to highlight common names like George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards—also noting that their followers such as Johnathan Edwards Jr. and Samuel Hopkins opposed slavery and fought for women's equality—but offers only a brief mention of women like Sarah Grimké, Angelina Grimké, and Dorothy Day. Even turning to recent years, Balmer chooses to highlight male Christian leaders like Ron Sider and former president Jimmy Carter, while he only gives recognition to women like Karen Swallow Prior and Lisa Sharon Harper in an extended list of names.

Whereas Balmer and Alberta offer accounts of evangelicalism in the past and today, Gushee's theory-driven project is rooted more in prescribing a path forward for Christians. Perhaps partly for this reason, Gushee is the most diligent of the three authors in including marginalized voices.

One group that Gushee consistently names as being attacked and used as a social punching bag by ARC is the LGBTQ community. For example, in his treatment of Hungary, Gushee dedicates a section to the ideological "war against LGBTQ+ people," enacted through violent rhetoric against the community as well as discriminatory legislation like the 2021 "anti-pedophile" law. In his chapter on Brazil, Gushee pauses to name a "consistent pattern of demagoguery in relation to LGBTQ+ people" across all of his case studies. Gushee concludes that "targeting this group is so often the means by which conservative Christian populists gain power."

It is notable, but not surprising, that neither Balmer nor Alberta include the LGBTQ community in their texts. There are many potential reasons for this omission. Read charitably, one could argue that the queer community has played such a small role in the story of American evangelicalism that they are accordingly excluded from accounts of that story. However, we ought to acknowledge that many Christians still cannot conceive of a tradition that welcomes LGBTQ people. Their exclusion, then, no matter what the reason, implicitly reflects a Christian imagination that does not

have queer Christians in its purview.

There is a large population that Gushee misses almost entirely: Asian Americans. Gushee's account assumes a Western vision of Christianity that is deeply tied to the project of Christendom. His ultimate push toward "national democratic covenantalism" functions in a paradigm where Christians once held power, lost this power, and are now seeking to regain it. There is a Christian norm, then a secular revolution, and then a religious counterrevolution.

Gushee argues that "authoritarianism in Christianity is a feature, not a bug, and it's unlikely to change in most Christian quarters anytime soon." Asian Christians, though, stand as a direct contrast to this. As David Chao convincingly argues, Asian American Christianity functions outside and against this paradigm because it does not fuse Christianity and politics in a reclamation project. In Asia, Christianity never held social dominance, apart from the efforts of European colonizers. By excluding Asian Americans from his project, Gushee misses a counterexample of Christian engagement that values democracy without seeking absolute control.

Alberta, too, broadly sweeps over the presence of Asian Americans in US evangelicalism. (He does highlight the work of Curtis Chang, although only in service to Chang's work alongside David French and Russell Moore in creating a collection of resources about faith and politics called the After Party.) This is important to note, given the aim of Alberta's project.

Understanding American evangelicalism today requires not ignoring Asian Americans at a local or institutional level. Asian Americans are at the helm of key evangelical institutions such as InterVarsity, the Gospel Coalition, Christians for Social Action, and more. Asian Americans at evangelical institutions like Fuller Seminary are developing theological texts that embrace their particular experiences and locations. In response to the increase in anti-Asian hate catalyzed by the global pandemic, Asian American evangelicals are building new organizations such as the Asian American Christian Collaborative and Stop AAPI Hate. Alberta fails to acknowledge any of this.

Each of these books offers a prescriptive vision for the future of Christianity in America. Balmer frames his vision in this way: "If Christianity is once again to become relevant to the twenty-first century, not only must believers reconnect with the Bible, they must also reaffiliate with the best of their tradition." It is worthwhile

not only to interrogate the premise that Christianity has become irrelevant but to name that the book's "best" examples predominantly mirror moderate evangelicalism as it exists today: predominately White and male, with an acknowledgment that women and Black folk deserve equality but a failure to produce tangible examples of women or non-White Christians. Perhaps this is one reason Christianity is on the decline.

Alberta writes primarily as an investigative journalist but does not shy away from including his own thoughts, including in the close to his book. Offering a vision of evangelicalism that can be both reformed and renewed, Alberta still holds onto a powerful hope that, despite what he's seen and experienced, evangelicalism can be a positive force in the world.

Gushee's vision of the evangelical tradition is inseparable from his condemnation of ARC. For him, these two projects go hand in hand. Therefore, his prescriptive vision is not through and beyond evangelicalism but rather a renewed Christian commitment to liberal democracy.

In 1922, Harry Emerson Fosdick climbed the pulpit of New York's First Presbyterian Church to offer a sermon, "Shall the Fundamentalists Win?" In it, Fosdick argued for a wider evangelical tent—a Christian imagination that includes those on the margins of American society. The next year, Princeton theologian J. Gresham Machen issued a reply in his famed text *Christianity and Liberalism* in which the walls of the Christian tent were effectively sewn shut.

Today, evangelical Christians and scholars of the tradition are reckoning with the same alternatives posed by Fosdick and Machen. Who is allowed to enter the tent, and how many people can it hold? Balmer, Gushee, and Alberta would likely each give a different answer. It is up to readers to decide for themselves which vision to follow—or whether they will pave a new path themselves.